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MEN AND TANKS

ON ACTIVE SERVICE SERIES

MEN AND TANKS

MEN AND TANKS

BY J. C. MACINTOSH

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ON ACTIVE SERVICE SERIES

MEN AND TANKS

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MEN AND TANKS.

CHAPTER I

THE WANDERER'S RETURN

TOSH was seated in the officers' coach of a troop-train, waiting for it to start. He had been similarly engaged, off and on, for seventy-five minutes, having arisen with the lark from a comfortable bed at the officers' club in order not to miss what was, according to the local R.T.O., "the only punctual train in France."

As he mused contentedly on his doings of the past fortnight, his eyes roamed over the station platform. Under the watchful scrutiny of two red-caps, a stream of soldiers was entering, reinforcements, if only in virtue of the cleanliness of their iron-ration bags. Between the ticket-office and the hut, sacred to the R.T.O., a glimpse could be caught of that quaint little train by which Tosh had so often journeyed to the seaside health-resort some six miles out of town. As his gaze passed idly along the platform, he noticed two *poilus* clad in faded blue,

bedecked, as usual, with the innumerable little haversacks and satchels in which their Army delights.

"On leave, I suppose," he muttered to himself, and thought of the *permissionnaire* he had once encountered, who, from a safe and comfortable base-job, had come on leave to one of the hottest villages behind the line, and had spent a blissful day rooting round in the debris of his paternal mansion.

Suddenly Tosh's eye was caught by a surprising spectacle. Hurrying through the gateway as if his life depended on it, came the most beautifully apparelled of young subalterns. He was hung round about with all manner of map-cases, haversacks, field-glasses, and other "Blighty touches"; from his pink cheeks to his pink breeches, the colour-scheme was a delight to the eye; and he was followed by a diminutive batman, almost obliterated by a most capacious valise. Up dashed the young officer to the coach, perspiringly followed by his faithful, if overloaded henchman. It was then that Tosh noticed the new-comer's badges—the new Tank badge of which he had heard, but which had not yet percolated to France, and on his right sleeve a resplendent Tank in black and silver thread.

"Here, Tanks!" he called. "Come in here with me. The other dog-box is for the O.C. train. Send your man with your valise along to the trucks; they're labelled Chevaux 8, so there should be room for it!"

Having taken this advice, the new-comer climbed in and set about divesting himself of his Christmas-tree trappings. On closer scrutiny his appearance somewhat modified Tosh's judgment of extreme inexperience, but that he was essentially a "young officer" admitted of no question.

"So that's the new badge, is it?" remarked Tosh. "Have a gasper? No, they haven't arrived out here yet. Don't think much of them—too much like the A.S.C. and the R.A.M.C., and such-like. You're going up as a reinforcement I suppose—which battalion? So! Well, you're lucky; you've struck the best of the bunch."

Forthwith he plunged into an eulogy of the old X Battalion, which in the earliest days, as X Company, had done such outstanding work, and had continued doing all the best work down to the present time. Such bursts of eloquence are common enough from old hand to new; in the present case it was swallowed eagerly enough. It was explained to the new hand why colours were worn on

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MEN AND TANKS

place in Tosh's affections by reason of the hot baths to be obtained at the local convent) they ambled along gently to a village a few miles out.

"Here you are," said Tosh, "this is us. Wonder what the billets are like. It's a nice little place—*beaucoup estaminets* and such-like. Hullo, there comes our second in command."

Forthwith he leapt out and strolled off to meet Captain Pilkinson, second in command of his Company, a man famous throughout the Corps for sound sense and highly-decorative profanity. From him he obtained detals as to billets, and went along to the Mess for a drink.

"How's life up here, skipper?" he inquired.

"Oh, ——, cushy as ——. I've got a lovely billet, with two pukka, high-class girls in it; nothing to do all day; a topping mess, and an officers' club established in the best *estaminet*. The whole battalion's here, without any Tanks, playing round doing arm-drill and semaphore, waiting for something to happen. Here you are; here's the Mess—in you go. Hayles, two whiskies! Pretty good, yes, no, hey?"

Tosh, being accustomed to the local idioms,

replied that it was pretty good. The Mess was situated in the back room of the local school. It boasted two windows (complete with glass), a stove, three tables, easy chairs and the usual tasteful pictures on the walls. Seated round the stove were three officers, with whom Tosh proceeded happily to swap drinks.

"What are you chaps doing?" he asked.

"Nothing at present," replied the reconnaissance officer, "but the air is full of the most disquieting rumours!"

CHAPTER II

WARNING

THE rumours of a show in the offing did not develop for several days, and Tosh fell back into the free-and-easy ways of the Tank Corps when incomplete with Tanks. He endeavoured to instil into his crew the rudiments of arm-drill, which both he and they had forgotten. He lectured them on visual-training; he let them display their knowledge, and occasionally their ignorance, of the Lewis Gun. And in his spare time, of which there was an astonishing amount, he foregathered with other irresponsibles in the officers' club, drank vast quantities of *café-au-lait*, and, under the watchful eye of Maman Fresnoy-Dubois, flirted pleasantly with Lucy and Jimmie, the daughters of the house.

To this idyllic life a term was set by a sudden announcement in Company Orders: "The following crews will parade at 8.30 a.m. to take over Tanks as detailed below." Followed a list of crews in which Tosh figured.

Speculation was rife that evening in the absence of the senior officers who were responsible for the order; and, when the

workshop officer entered mess, he was immediately greeted with a volley of questions.

"Yes, they're those salved buses brought over from Central Workshops by A Company. The engines have all been "converted"—which means aluminium pistons—and overheat like blazes; the timing is all wrong; a couple have twisted shafts; and some of them have bullet-holes plugged with putty. However, a little work will do you young lads no end of good. Stand me a beer, somebody."

"That's all very well, Sprockets," replied the reconnaissance officer, usually designated as the R.O. "Because you've been joy-riding round France in a Brigade Sunbeam, and coming late to Mess with your hands artistically unclean to produce an impression of work well done—yes, thanks, I'll have a Bass—I suppose you think the rest of the Company have been doing nothing. You don't realise how wearing it is, after not touching a hipe for years, to instruct our bright recruitees in arm-drill by numbers. Besides, personally, I've been trying to instil some idea of semaphore signalling into the most thick-headed lot of young officers it's ever been my lot to encounter. Cheerioh, everybody!"

"'Ear, 'ear," applauded Herr Von (so

named because of a close resemblance his real name bore to that of a famous Boche air-fighter). "And the price of the pills is twopence per box! I thought myself you'd spent most of your time wrecking other people's motor-bikes. Still, I'll be glad to be shut of all that stuff myself; if we're the Tank Corps we'd better stick to our Tanks and get on with the War. Wonder where they'll send us, though—hope to blazes it's not the salient. What do you think, skipper?"

"Not much fear of that," replied Captain Alphen, M.C., commanding 10 Section, who had been enviously reading the "*marraine*" columns in the *Vie Parisienne*. "Ypres is so full of buses stuck in the mud they dare not send any more, or they'd sink it altogether instead of its being only half-submerged. I've heard rumours of a new kind of stunt altogether—a real chance for us at last—to be kept absolutely hush-hush. Anyway, if you take my tip you'll rout out any old equipment lists you can get hold of; there aren't any with the Tanks, and anything that's worth winning A Company will have won by now, I swear."

With which safe prophecy Tosh's section

commander retired in good order to his billet.

" Well, well," said Herr Von, " come what may, here's luck to our next effort in the Great War "—a toast which was drunk with acclamation.

CHAPTER III

TAKING OVER

NEXT morning the Company duly paraded at 8.30, and marched off by sections to the Tankodrome, which lay about a mile out of the village along the *route nationale*. The name calls up visions of sandy arenas, where the dust rises high above the whirling wheels as all Rome hangs breathless upon the fate of her favourite charioteer. The reality consisted, *tout simplement*, of a square of churned and trampled mud between green fields. In one corner stood a marquee full of stores, with a sentry striving nobly, and on the whole, successfully, to resemble the soldier he was, and not the chauffeur he had been. Drawn up in two lines on either flank of the mud-patch, and covered with brown tarpaulins, lay the Tanks: "A" and "B" Coy. on the left; "C" Coy.—our Company—on the right; 10 Section, with Alphen and Tosh at the head, wheeled off the road into the mud—thereby losing all semblance of military precision—halted, and stood easy, while the Tank Commanders set about identifying each his own bus, of which he already knew the number.

It may here be explained that a Tank possesses two numbers, a manufacturer's number and a battalion number. The former is branded upon its hindquarters at birth, and remains until dissolution; the latter varies from time to time according to which crew are inhabiting the beast at the moment, and is intended to facilitate identification at a distance. As regards names, the choice, alas, is no longer left to the youthful and revue-full fancy of the young Tank pilot; names are passed down from Tank to Tank, and indicate the battalion, and occasionally the Company, to which the bus belongs.

"Tank Commanders, please march off their crews to take over Tanks and check equipment"—thus Captain Alphen.

Let us follow Tosh as he moves his men off.

Their particular "heavily-armoured car," Tank No. 2597, is at the extreme end of the line, and is fully exposed to a cutting cross-wind. Beyond the matter of position and number it has apparently no peculiarities; but Tosh, on whose young shoulders rests a heavy burden of experience, wonders gloomily just what tricks this specimen of devilry will develop on closer acquaintance.

"Overalls on," he orders, and the crew struggle resignedly into "suits combination

drill brown," the working dress of the Trade by Land. "Gunners, take off the cover; drivers, bring out all the equipment."

Two drivers, with practised skill, leap on to the rear slope of the track, swing themselves up by the unditching beam (a solid chunk of wood six feet long and one foot square, carried at the stern of the Tank for use in emergencies), and roll up the tarpaulin.

Meanwhile, the first driver, a most important personage, who is responsible for the mechanical efficiency of the Tank, proceeds to inspect her interior. "She," curiously enough, is a male, carrying six-pounder as well as machine-guns, and is therefore easy of access. The door is in the rear of the projecting "sponson," or gun-turret, and opens with a key. Having unlocked the door, the arch-devil pokes his head into the gloomy depths, immediately withdrawing it with a resounding curse. The gunners aloft, in rolling up the tarpaulin, have sent a cascade of water down through the periscope-hole in the sponson roof, doubtless as a ceremonial ablution for the new tenant on his first entry. This rite completed, he steps carefully inside.

The inside of a Tank is not remarkable for comfort or capaciousness. The centre is occupied by a large engine, the rear by a huge

differential, the two sides by field-guns, and the front by seats and driving controls; while the roof is not high enough to allow of standing upright. The fact that eight men frequently spend many crowded hours of glorious life in the remaining crevices does not prevent one man, if careless, from banging his head and both elbows at the same time; especially as the lighting arrangements are artificial and inadequate. But our friend is an old hand, rendered cautious by many a bump on projecting rivet-heads, and he sets about his business of examination without further ado. Meanwhile, the second driver (understudy to the first, with additional work of his own), and the third driver (cross-talk comedian and general nuisance) enter by the other door, open the tool-boxes in the floor, and throw tools and equipment into a large box outside.

The equipment list of a Tank is a document well worthy of study, comprising as it does such a medley of timber, hardware, and ironmongery as only a salvage-dump could ever rival. As he surveys the welter in gloomy silence, Tosh is reminded of an incident of the very early days when a Major, lately transferred from the cavalry, was checking stores. "Wires towing," he read from his

list, and was shown twenty feet of wire cable; "wires fuse," and a piece of silver one inch long and one millimetre in diameter was proudly exhibited; "key petrol filler cap" proved to be a large size Zulu knobkerie of iron, "key carburettor" being an affair the size of one's little finger. The Major was now hopelessly lost, and when "bars crow one" proved to be a crow-bar, his face was wreathed in smiles; but suddenly a horrid doubt crossed his mind, and calling up the subaltern in charge, he whispered, "Look here, for God's sake, don't show me a toothpick and call it 'bars ivory officers for the use of, one'!"

Slowly and methodically Tosh wades through the list of items useful and ornamental, decorative and deadly. Periscopes are there, and plugs sparking; spanners, scrapers, and shovels; gun spares, engine spares, track spares. There is included a fishing net, with green rags tied to it, as a camouflage; there are signalling discs and "flappers" which no Tank Commander has ever been known to use, but which are still religiously issued and must be exhibited. Gradually order develops out of chaos; the checking is complete, and Tosh writes out a duplicate list of his deficiencies. Meanwhile, the crew stow the

various implements away where they fondly hope they will be able to find them in case of need.

The first driver now reports the engine ready to start, "if the —— will start!" Tosh climbs inside and seats himself well forward, out of harm's way, and the three drivers get on to the starting handle. The starting-handle of a Tank is no puny touring-car affair; it is supported at both ends, and is so constructed as to give four men a grip. The first driver "trips his mag" and "tickles his carburettor" (operations of tremendous secrecy and importance), the second "engages her," while the third exclaims, "Bejabers, but she'd be hard to start in gear," and proceeds to rectify this omission of the late tenant. Finally all three hurl themselves at the starting-handle, and to a merry click, click, click from the magneto impulse-starter and a thirsty sucking from the carburettor they turn the engine over.

After a minute or two of this exhilarating sport, the engine showing no intention of starting, they stop and mop their brows; then at it again, and so for half an hour they labour and examine and swear and try again. Finally Tosh intervenes.

"Look here, there's only one thing for it—

boil some petrol and we'll inject it hot into the cylinders."

The first driver collects a small tin and an old Lewis Gun magazine, both of which he fills with petrol. Repairing to the nearest field, he places the tin in the magazine, and drops a match. The petrol immediately flares up; but, as the flames in the magazine die down, he extinguishes the tin by putting his foot over the mouth, picks it up in a pair of pliers, runs across to the Tank, injects the hot petrol with a syringe, and at the fourth turn the engine starts gaily with a splutter and a cough of smoke. This is a device not included in any published manual of "Hints on Easy Starting!"

While the gunners have been inspecting the six-pounders—as yet they have drawn no Lewis Guns—Tosh has been examining his seat and the various devices round it. The Tank Commander's seat, a horsehair cushion, is set well up in the forepeak or cab; as he sits in it, his feet rest on the upward slope where the belly runs up to the curve of the nose. In front, behind, and to the left, are various flaps and "gadgets" for observation; immediately above is a periscope-hole; to the right is a mounting for a Lewis Gun, while beside the Commander's seat is that for the

driver, with similar flaps and with controls for driving the Tank. Tosh tests them methodically, finds them O.K., and climbs outside to look at the tracks.

The tracks of a Tank consist of two endless belts running completely round the hull; each comprises some 80 steel plates, linked together flexibly and running in guides. Curiously enough, after a little use the track appears to have stretched and runs quite loose, owing to the bearing surfaces having worn; adjustment is therefore provided, and it is one of the fine arts of Tank-driving to keep the tracks evenly and correctly adjusted.

The tracks of Tank 2597 are neither new and stiff nor old and worn; but upon testing them with a crow-bar Tosh finds them slack and gives orders to have them tightened. This operation is performed with two huge spanners weighing some five pounds each, and is essentially a two-man job.

This detail having been attended to, Tosh reports himself to his skipper as ready to move off for lunch. The other crews of the section are in the like fortunate condition; they are accordingly marched back to the village and break off for the midday meal.

Thus began a fortnight of strenuous preparation. The Tanks a month ago had all

been certified ready for action by a body of experts; but the crews which had now taken them over expected shortly to entrust their lives to them, and it was remarkable how much work they found to do on them before they were satisfied. Tosh was more fortunate than some of his friends, who found themselves compelled either to change a twisted shaft or to replace worn sprockets—both highly skilled and difficult operations, entailing much labour, with three-foot crow bars and five pound sledge hammers. He, therefore, in spite of having to draw and test Lewis Guns and load ammunition into magazines, found ample leisure for innumerable adjustments such as his heart delighted in.

Finally came the order to "push in sponsons." This is the immediate and inevitable preliminary to a railway journey, and consists in pushing in the projecting gun-turrets along guide-ways until they are level with the side of the Tank. The operation is not a difficult one, but calls for co-operation between Tank and Tank. All bolts having been withdrawn, one Tank noses up to the sponson of her mate and gently but irresistibly pushes it in; the order is then reversed, and the benefactor is rewarded strictly according to his own good deeds. When a Tank has both sponsons

pushed in, her internal accommodation is scant indeed, and it is with heartfelt relief that her crew crowbar the sponsons out into place again.

In the evening of the day when sponsons had been pushed in, the expected order was promulgated, to wit, that on the morrow all Tanks would move to Central Workshops, and there entrain for an unknown destination "up the line."

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST MOVE

NEXT morning Tosh rose at an early hour, and watched his batman packing kit. While down the line, the Tank Corp permits itself many luxuries unknown to the "P.B.I," but the wise and experienced do not attempt to carry up the line all the collapsible chairs, beds and baths which have lightened their period of rest. Up the line there is usually material in plenty for ingenious constructions which can be left behind at each move. Tosh therefore made a judicious selection; what was to be left behind was conveyed to the Battalion Dump, what was to go with him he ordered Jakes to transport in a wheelbarrow (French, Mark VII., "pinched"), to the Tankodrome.

At 8.30, being all well and truly fed, the skeleton crews (*i.e.*, three drivers and an N.C.O.) fell in and marched off along the main road. No sooner had they arrived than they were swallowed up in a bewildering whirl of preparation. A Company move under these circumstances is always closely allied to a race-meeting; money is invari-

ably placed on the issue, and the competition between crews is something astonishing, for the first arrivals will have first choice of food, billets, and other creature comforts.

Tosh set to work at once packing his stuff. The top of a Tank between the tracks is a very narrow space, and the centre is occupied by an unprotected exhaust-pipe which soon becomes red-hot on the move. The difficulty of packing such inflammable material as camouflage nets, valises, and petrol will be apparent. In fact, nothing is more common than the sight of a Tank proceeding on its way, the crew inside blissfully unconscious of a furious fire "up aloft" which is destroying the fuel of propulsion, the net of invisibility, and the Commander's glad rags in one awful holocaust. Let the crew be warned and immediately, like bees from a hive, they swarm from man-hole and door armed with patent fire-extinguishers which never by any chance extinguish; boxes, tins, valises are flung wide, to splutter ingloriously in the mud, and while the officer sadly examines the charred remnants of his "posh" field-boots, the crew thank their stars that the ammunition didn't start going off!

The secret of safe packing is in the use

of "spuds." Concerning these mysterious articles a word is necessary. They are but distantly allied to the spud which is an agricultural implement; they have nothing whatever in common with the spud which is an edible tuber, but are, in fact, blunt-headed, anchor-shaped steel plates furnished with a central rib, which are clipped upon the tracks of a Tank to give a better grip in soft ground. Unfortunately, if the ground is hard (*e.g.*, metalled roads), they are worse than useless, and are therefore carried loose until the time comes to affix them. Now pack forty of these spuds over the exhaust-pipe and you have, in theory, a fire-proof protection. Nothing apparently could be simpler; but there is a catch somewhere, because whenever and wherever a Company of Tanks makes a ten-mile move, as sure as death some one will have a fire. Nor would the Tank Corps have it otherwise; in a life of dreary monotony and endless discomfort, why should we abolish anything which tends to provide harmless amusement for the troops?

To return, however, to our muttons. Tosh, having drawn petrol, oil, and grease, and seen it safely bestowed in the bus, having carefully protected his valise and his crew's

kits with spuds, being, in fact, ready to move off, turned to listen to a small voice which spoke pleadingly in his ear:

"Please, sir," said the diminutive servant of Tosh's respected section commander, "Captain Alphen says will you take his valise on your Tank, sir?"

Tosh had been expecting this. Probably the only point in which the subaltern ever has an advantage over his skipper is that he possesses the beast of burden, while his senior officer does not.

"All right, Jones, I'll take it, provided you get hold of the mess corporal and tell him I have no room to carry his crockery." Satisfied with his bargain, Tosh had the engine started and proceeded to move off.

He was not the first by any means. The unmistakable clatter of Tank-tracks filled the air; several quaint shapes were cautiously threading their way through the jumble of the 'drome, while a couple of early starters were already on the road. Tosh was not perturbed. The run would be long and trying; the result dependent more on previous preparation and present good driving than on any spurt off the mark. One Tank Commander had already discovered this to his cost. Having neglected to move off very

cautiously from a mud-puddle, where his tracks had been stationary for a month, he had snapped the links of a plate, and the broken track, being flexible only in one direction, stuck straight out in front like an ironical signpost. Only half an hour's work, but an unfortunate beginning to a heavy day.

Tank 2597 had better luck and, with Tosh in front directing, safely threaded her way through the Tank-lines of the other Companies and debóuched upon the road. For reasons not unconnected with his comfort, it is an almost invariable rule for the Tank Commander to walk in front of his Tank when she is on the move, the exceptions being first, when the ground is muddy, and second, when the outside air is unhealthy. Tosh, then, is to be pictured strolling leisurely along, hands in pockets, occasionally throwing a glance over his shoulder to see that his faithful beast is following.

It is difficult for those who have not seen one to imagine the extreme slowness and unwieldy deliberation of the original, large, Mark IV. Tank. Their maximum speed was six miles an hour. Almost every change of direction, being accomplished by the slipping out of very refractory gears, necessitated a

halt, if only a momentary halt. With care and judgment, however, they could be steered to within an inch, a useful attribute which Tosh had occasion to test.

The direct route to Central Workshops would have been straight along the main road, a distance of perhaps twelve miles; but as the passage of Tanks does not improve the metalling of a road, a divergence was made a mile out of the Tankodrome, the route running first by country lanes and finally across country, a distance of something in the neighbourhood of twenty miles.

No sooner had Tosh turned off the main road into a very narrow lane, with high banks on both sides, than he met a market-cart completely blocking the way. The horse was evidently unused to leviathans, and snorted wildly; but, being addressed by his driver in the universal gutturals of the farmer, condescended to stand still while Tosh, guiding his crew with uplifted forefinger, steered his craft with such nicety that, while not more than three-quarters of the right-bank was cut away, the paint was hardly brushed from the farmer's cart. They parted with expressions of mutual goodwill—or so Tosh interpreted the verbal half-bricks hurled at him by the Frenchman. Parisian

French is usually considered a mellifluous language; but go to the sturdy peasantry who form the true backbone of France, and you will find their patois as harsh and uncouth as the most earnest philologist could desire.

For some time after this little incident, the journey was uneventful. After a short interval of indecision the road mounted steadily up the right-hand slope of the valley. To right and left, far as the eye could see every inch of ground was under heavy crops, save where a little copse crowned some knoll. As they climbed higher, more and more little villages could be seen smoking peacefully in the blue haze, while right and left ran the straight white tree-lined roads of France. Just so had many another fair valley appeared before it was whelmed in that terror which even now could be heard thundering in the distance. Tosh felt himself in sympathy with the famous division whose sole motto is "Kill!"

While musing thus, Tosh had the satisfaction of passing the Tanks ahead of him by virtue of the superior pulling powers of his engine in third speed. Consequently he was the first to enter the village of Equancourt. As he chuff-chuffed along the main street (the village boasts two streets, the

main street and the other one), such of the inhabitants as were not at work in the fields crowded to door and window, with guffaws and school-boy jests for the lumbering disturber of their peace. This, no doubt, was kindly meant, but Tosh could gladly have got along without it. Having surveyed the route before, he knew of a ticklish corner ahead where spectators were particularly undesirable. Here the route turned at right angles into a lane just the width of a Tank, the jaws of the entrance being the corners of mud houses which would cave in at a touch The available area of approach was considerably lessened by the presence of the village pond; wherefore the Tank must swing at right angles on a flat metalled road.

Now when a Tank swings on flat ground, a length of track must scrape over the ground carrying a weight of forty tons. Given soft ground, and the swing can be accomplished in very small space, but on a road it is frequently difficult to swing a Tank in less than its own length. By a happy combination of judgment on Tosh's part, and brute force on that of his second driver, the manoeuvre was successfully accomplished; but Tosh learnt later that of the following Tanks no less than four brushed the wall of the left-

hand house, the last one leaving a gaping hole sufficiently large for the passage of the piano, which could plainly be discerned inside. Result, a furious complaint by the owner, trouble for the Tank Commander, and a trifling addition to the cost of the War.

Tosh's engine now began to " overheat like stink." As they were approaching a village in which he had been billeted for a month some time before, they carried on until they reached his old abode. Pulling up on the doorstep, Tosh left his crew to shorten the fan-belt, which had stretched after its kind, while he paid a call on his ex-landlady. He was rewarded for his politeness with some excellent coffee, which he shared with the crew; and matters being now ship-shape, they carried on. The half-hour halt had put them back to fifth in the race, but within a mile they came to the end of the road part of the journey. From here on would be downhill, over soft ground; accordingly engines were shut off, and the five crews clambered stiffly through the man-hole (the sponson-doors being inaccessible when sponsons are pushed in) and lay down for lunch and an hour's rest.

The crews' heads were humming from the incessant clatter of gear-wheels in a confined

space, while the officers had walked ten miles largely with a head over one shoulder. Consequently the hour was not long in passing.

At its conclusion, they started up and set off. Tosh had had enough of walking, so he sat himself on top of the cab in front, leaving the direction to his first driver, but ready, if need be, to signal through the flap.

They were now upon a regular cross-country Tank-route—a strip of churned mud thirty yards broad, running between fields green with young crops. In the mud could be seen the spoor of countless Tanks crossing and recrossing. Owing to distribution of weight, it is no deeper in soft mud than a man's; yet on the hardest of roads it will remain for months, the projecting lip of the track being forced in with a forty-ton weight. Only a couple of inches deep on the average, traces of it will remain after months of rain and weather.

The trip now frankly developed into a race. The going qualities of all five buses were much the same; but in matters of steering and tactics there was abundant opportunity for the display of individual skill. What a queer spectacle those cross-country trips afforded! The group of steel monsters crawling fussily along, tracks clatter-

ing, exhausts thrumming, steam pouring out from the radiator-escape in the roof, for all the world as though they are doing fifty instead of five miles an hour. Meanwhile the Tank Commanders in front, apparently so indifferent, in reality are fiercely eager as to the result, and desperately impatient of the leisurely pace, as they indicate with quick waves where an opportunity shows itself. And at the finish, no spoken comment—but how those schoolboy-veterans enjoyed watching the others come in, their own bus the while snugly camouflaged and the crew happy in the nearest Y.M. !

"You know, boys," says Old Bill, "we shall miss this blinking war when it's over." A jest, but with an undertone of truth. How often in the unfriendly atmosphere of later life, we shall look back with longing on the "terrible years," missing their careless, happy-go-lucky *camaraderie.* No need to exhibit the skeleton at those feasts; all had the moral constantly in mind, and the result was a spirit which can never be recaptured save in similar circumstances—which, God in His mercy, forbid !

After a spanking three-hour run, Tosh began to draw near Central Workshops. He had indulged in a small fire—damage, one gas-

mask, old type, and a corner of the tarpaulin; but was running second. The first sight of their goal came from the top of a hillock, whence they looked down upon the rows of huge sheds, green corrugated iron on steel girders, which comprised the actual shops. Flanking them could be seen two rows of big hangars—spare-part receiving and distributing shed. In the distance, close to the main line railway which ran up the valley, lay the salvage department, where old hulks reduced, apparently, to scrap-iron, were skilfully built up again into serviceable weapons of war; while above the salvage-shop was the huge square training-ground where new types, new methods, and new devices were constantly put on their trial. Having been concerned six months before in erecting the first hut on this site, which was then empty pasture, Tosh was in a position to appreciate the wonderful growth of this engineer's paradise.

As they ran down the last hill, the Tanks passed within a few yards of the barb-wire entanglements surrounding the Chinese compound. The placid Celestial was extensively used at Central Workshops, and under a N.C.O. who understood him was capable of surprisingly skilled work. The "local moon-

faces," as the second driver described them, had apparently been celebrating some ancestral rite, for the entrance to their camp was decorated with a splendid arch of red and yellow paper, while Chinese lanterns, whence obtained only their possessors could say, hung on strings between the huts. A few gentlemen of leisure placidly surveyed Tosh as he steamed past; but, to men who could themselves make the puffing devils, it was a matter of small interest.

The route now crossed the road and entered a mud-square immediately above the railway. Tosh ran up beside the first arrival, and filled up with petrol,oil and water from a convenient dump, making a note of the quantities for his Daily Log Sheet, a document rendered nightly by every Tank Commander complete with Tank. Before he had finished Captain Alphen arrived; under his instructions, Tosh marched his men to their billets, saw them comfortable and in hopes of a meal, and trudged happily off to "one of the best Messes in France."

This palatial edifice possessed the unusual advantage of being a temporary permanency, and was soundly and cosily constructed. The ante-room boasted an ornamental fire place and a ping-pong table, while round the

walls were comfortable cushioned arm chairs. The inevitable Kirchners were set off by water-colour landscapes, while English and French periodicals were strewn carelessly on a corner table. Such are the priceless blessings of a base-job ; the combatant officers envied, but did not fume, for they knew the value of the work done and the ready hospitality constantly extended to members of all the battalions.

Talk in Mess that evening was animated. Besides the permanent staff, who, as dispensers of new Tanks and receivers of old ones, usually had interesting news to impart, there were representatives present of almost every battalion at that time in France. Tosh met many companions of his early training days, and swapped yarns with avidity in the intervals of ping-pong. To crown the evening's enjoyment, the second in command arrived with the glad news that the Company was proceeding, not to some sticky part of the line, but to the training-ground on the old Boche trench-system, there to practise a new plan of attack.

" It'll be some place, too, I can tell you—all the battalions are congregating there for three weeks' practice, and then—the real thing ! "

On receipt of this welcome intelligence, "C" Company sat down to make a night of it; there was wassail in the great hall till an unchristian hour, and many an officer had difficulty in finding his way to his temporary bed.

CHAPTER V

UP THE LINE

THE morning after, Tosh paraded his skeleton crew independently at 8 o'clock and marched off to the Tank park. In a few minutes his bus was moving off towards the entraining camp. The route lay between the row of corrugated iron shops and the hangars. Already the shops were busily at work, with a great clanging of hammers and chatter of steam riveters ; dirty men in dirty overalls—sergeant-major's last hopes every one of them—were strolling leisurely about with queer tools in their hands, while occasionally a group of Chinese, clad in sky-blue jeans, brimless straw hats, and beaming smiles, were apparently engaged in hindering the passage of *bona fide* workers. Passing down the corduroy-road, Tosh swung left, taking up a position immediately opposite an inclined timber ramp which finished abruptly in a four-foot drop on to a railway line. These ramps form the regular method of entraining Tanks. The specially-constructed Tank-trucks are perfectly flat, with very little gap between each, and thus form a long,

narrow platform. The first Tank to entrain mounts the inclined ramp and runs directly on to the trucks, passing over them all until it reaches the first; the second Tank runs as far as the second truck, and so on. The advantage of being first on the train is, that whereas entraining is usually performed in safety by daylight, when running along a train is a simple matter, detraining is only too often performed under shell-fire at midnight, when it is desirable to have as few trucks to cover as possible.

In the present case, "C" Company's train was not yet in. Entraining was due to start at 10, but before that Tosh had a few spares to draw. Having obtained them from the nearest hangar, he proceeded to inspect his surroundings.

Between the entrainment siding and the main line lay the repair-shop for salved buses. The number of Tanks requiring such attention had evidently exceeded expectations; the hangars provided were full, while all the available space in the neighbourhood was strewn with Tanks in every variety of disrepair. A skeleton in the near distance attracted Tosh's attention — engine, differential, and radiator had all been lifted out through the roof; both tracks were off and

lay extended beside her, while half the nose had apparently been carried away by a shell. Tosh strolled closer—there was something familiar about that nose—and to his surprise discovered her to be one of "C" Company's old buses, half the crew of which he had himself been concerned in burying in a shell-hole near Ypres. Now she was in the hands of six Chinese under a British corporal; Tosh wondered whether, when she was once more fit for service, her new crew would ever hear of her wicked past.

He recognised several others among the many buses, and placed the remainder in their battalions by their names; but soon he grew weary of the incessant hammering of the riveters, and strolled off to the training-ground. Here, parked along three sides of a square, lay the veterans of the Corps, old Tanks with famous names, obsolete for fighting purposes, but still useful for training and for the testing of new devices. In the square itself were a few of these new devices; among them Tosh noticed one Tank carrying on its cab a huge bundle of sticks some four feet high. Its use appeared problematical, but he distrusted it on principle, little realizing how closely the device would concern him in the near future. In one corner he discovered one of the

new "whippets," then still an untried craft, concerning which speculation was rife. He inspected it inside and out with care, and an earnest desire to "see the little beggar go." Close by lay what had all the appearance of a super-Tank; in fact, it was a "G.—C," an unsuccessful type subsequently used for supply.

Satisfied with his tour of inspection, he returned to the ramp, where the remainder of the Company was now drawn up.

The train was now backed up against the ramp, and "chocked up"—i.e., supports were put up under the ends of the trucks to prevent their tipping up. Tosh started his engine and prepared to move up the ramp.

Entraining a Tank is in reality the simplest of operations. But as the train has no raised sides, is barely a foot wider than the Tank, and has a habit of swaying as the Tank moves along it, the appearance is presented of a most risky proceeding, in which the crew are in imminent danger of an abrupt plunge sideways to the ground four feet below. Further, both the workshops official responsible for the Tanks and the R.T.O. responsible for the train are invariably under the impression that the Tank Commander knows nothing

about his job, and is too much of a fool to realize it.

Picture, then, the scene—Tosh in front of Tank, which moves slowly up the ramp. To him dashes an excited workshops-wallah:

"Lock your differential now, and come straight ahead."

Tosh takes no notice; he is manoeuvring on the brakes. When the time comes, he signals with uplifted forefinger, and the differential is locked.

"She's not quite straight"—the tab-merchant takes up the tale—"she wants to go a bit right."

Tosh blandly ignores him, signals for a left swing, and stops her; examines her alignment with judicial care—what time the W.O. and the R.T.O. unite in bad advice—approves, and signals her to come on. As she approaches the edge of the ramp, from which there is a slight drop to the truck, the W.O. calls in to the crew:

"Unlock your differential!"

The offender being a Major, Tosh contents himself with signalling "washout"—the crew are old hands, and take orders from their Commander; Tank 2597 moves gently forward and drops sweetly on to the truck.

"Now unlock," calls Tosh, "and steer on your brakes."

Walking backwards along the train, he watches the edges of the tracks, and as they encroach to right or left upon the few inches of safety, signals the driver for left or right brake. The Tank, four feet in air upon a narrow, swaying platform, moves along as safely and as confidently as if on solid earth.

Arrived at the first truck, the Tank is "chocked up." To accomplish this, a beam is placed across the truck at a marked spot in advance of the centre. The bus climbs this until her nose is well up in the air. A similar beam having been placed behind her, she is backed down upon this, and is consequently supported quite clear of the truck at two specially strengthened points. With brakes on and engine in gear, she is safe to ride over the most hastily-constructed track.

This operation having been successfully performed, Tosh's crew climbed out through the man-hole and began to cover up. At this point the R.T.O. arrived with instructions that the baggage on top must not project more than one foot above the cab. As at present arranged, it projected at least three feet.

"Very good, sir," replied Tosh, and proceeded to shuffle valises and petrol tins.

After considerable labour, the height was reduced to two feet.

"Come on, you fellows, get her covered up quickly and he won't notice; he's back at the ramp now."

The crew drew the tarpaulins over and tied them firmly against the twenty-mile wind they would soon have to withstand, and when the R.T.O. next appeared he passed the bus as fit to travel.

The train was timed to leave in half an hour. The crew made their way to a cattle-truck of the usual type, while Tosh repaired to the little passenger-coach, where his pack had been stowed by his batman. The mess-corporal, invaluable man, had tea on the go, and the officers were sampling the many varieties of chocolate and biscuit they had obtained at the local canteen.

After the lapse of an hour, during which the line had been assiduously watched for signs of an engine to pull the train, the second in command went along to interview the R.T.O. in his cabin half a mile up the line. That superior individual, having been in considerable evidence during the entraining,

when his services might have been dispensed with, had now departed for lunch, and would not be back for two hours. A corporal, however, explained the situation.

The engine, it appeared, was expected at any moment, having been delayed by the (French) engine-driver's meeting a friend in the *estaminet* where he ate his breakfast. Unfortunately the day's time-table was made up for this stretch of line, and traffic was heavy and important; consequently the Tank train could not have a "march" (apparently the technical term for the right to proceed) before 2.30, when it would be sandwiched between an empty hospital-train and a consignment of heavy howitzers.

For practical purposes, this meant arrival at 3 a.m., and no night's sleep as against arrival at 11 p.m., and a comfortable billet.

"They might have delayed it till to-morrow while they were about it," complained the R.O. "I know a lovely little *estaminet* a mile away, and there's a bioscope in the camp. They never seem to study creature-comforts in this war, do they?"

Further repinings were interrupted by the arrival of lunch. The Tank Corps, having a superfluity of petrol, does most of its cooking by primus stove; consequently, a hot meal

can be provided in five minutes under almost any circumstances. What is more, every officer carried in his kit a pocket-primus, over which his servant heats his shaving-water and boils his morning coffee. The luxurious go so far as to carry toasting attachments, not to make toast, but to warm billets in cold weather, and in winter the genial roar of four "primi" is the inevitable concomitant of an evening bridge-party. A luxurious life, indeed; but there are times when business presses and transport is scarce, when even the Trade by Land must forego its hot-water bottles at night!

At length the dilatory engine arrived, the driver blandly unconscious of the black looks cast at him. He was well aware that there was a war on, but surely it was not every day that the son of his daughter's godfather's cousin came home on *permission*, nor could he, without gross rudeness, refuse to celebrate his return. There is a story of a vital munition train which was delayed for an hour while the driver was hunted for. On being discovered working in his garden he explained that he had observed rain-clouds blowing up, and wished to get his tobacco into shelter before the storm. What a wonderful war it has been, to be sure!

The " march " having at last arrived, the train slowly pulled out of the siding on to the main line.

" Wonder how many of these buses will be back here in two months' time, in the repair shops ? " remarked Tosh.

" Cheer up, old bean," responded the R.O. " Look, there's that billet. Damn it, but I'd like to see Jeanne-Marie again ! "

The line ran up a smiling valley, studded with little villages. This being the Tank Corps Reserved Area, every village was known to the Company, and concerning every village there was some scandalous story to be told. The sight of a Tank-train was here a common event, and the villagers hardly troubled to lift their heads from their work.

" Yes, they are blasé enough," remarked some one, " but I wonder how many hours will elapse before the Boche knows all about our having gone up the line ! Ah, well, it doesn't matter back here—it's further up we'll have to watch it. Come on, you lumps of cannon-fodder, let's have a game of bridge. All right, poker, then—I always win at poker."

Presently the train ran into the station of a fair-sized town.

" The dirtiest hole in France," grumbled

Tosh; "all these picturesque, twisting mediæval streets, feet deep in filth."

"What about the famous picture-shop?"

"Bores me stiff. Besides, it's too well known to be healthy."

"Yes, that's true," sighed the R.O. "I knew it as a D.R. when the French held it, and it certainly has deteriorated. I know a really nice girl here, though, not the usual *estaminet* type, you know, but a puffick lidy. I met her at Amiens on holiday, but she helps run a little draper's shop here. And anyway, Tosh, we didn't have a bad day here that time we so cleverly missed the train!"

The R.O.'s reminiscences were interrupted by the arrival on the next line of a full Red Cross Train. First came the stretcher-cases, in long specially-constructed coaches; after them the walking wounded, sitting up in the ordinary corridor compartments. Some were yarning, some smoking, some playing bridge, but one and all bore smiles of the most deep-seated cheerfulness. As the train pulled up, from the compartment opposite a man with one arm in a sling, and a Balaclava set rakishly over one ear, called out of the window:

"Hullo, you funny lads, what are you? Pontoon-sections for the Rhine, or Handley-

Page Bombers? I shouldn't go in that direction, though, if I were you, there's a hell of a war on up there; people getting hurt almost daily, so I'm told."

"That's all right, my lad," came the response. "Don't get fresh because you pricked yourself on the barbs of the wireless. We're going to win the war, for the sake of brave little Belgium! Don't get engaged to the first V.A.D. who washes your face, will you? You want to pick and choose a bit. My Gawd, don't some people have all the luck!"

The Tank train now began to get under way. They parted with many "cheeriohs" and "good lucks"; the one train load bound for what is usually considered the happiest period of a soldier's life; the other for what gentlemen, who doubtless speak with authority, assure us is "worse than hell."

The train now began to enter the fringe of the war zone. Darkness had already fallen, but in all the woods twinkled innumerable lights from the camps of infantry in divisional rest; and Tosh's memory could recall only too well the battered villages and desolate countryside which were now to be his constant surroundings for many a month to come. The roar of artillery had gradually increased,

until the reports of the heavier guns could be distinguished from the muttering of the lighter field-guns, while the horizon was alight with a constant flickering radiance. To the sound of that infernal orchestra, which night and day would accompany their every act and thought, until quiet was become a thing unnatural and to be feared, the officers curled up in corners to sleep as best they might.

Tosh awoke to find the train stationary at a little siding. By that queer instinct which humanity still possesses, in every coach sleepers awoke, conscious somehow that the journey was over. While the train was shunted in against the ramp, crews and officers found their own buses, stripped the tarpaulins, started up cold engines, and ran off the chocking beams. No sooner had the train come to rest than it was "chocked up," and amid the bewildering flashes of the guns the Tanks ran off the train.

Tosh, it will be recollected, had driven first on to the train. He was therefore next to the ramp, and left to others the uneasy work of running along the trucks. Once off the ramp, he was instructed by his section commander to "swing right, follow the road to the light railway, cross it, and park for the night." He had been here before, and knew

his way, and was soon facing the ramp over the railway. This, the regular type of Tank-crossing, consisted in reality of two ramps, one on each side of the line, with space between for the passage of trains. Tank 2597 nosed carefully up the first; as she came to the point of balance her nose swung down, landing gently but firmly on the second, and she crawled across. One by one the others followed, and drew up in loose formation in the open space beyond. It was then 2.30; at 8 they would proceed on their two-hour cross-country journey. Without more ado, the crews threw themselves down beside their iron charges, and carried on with the night's sleep.

The light of to-morrow's dawn revealed a picturesque scene. In the lap of a long valley lay what had been at some time a flourishing little village. At the cross-roads still stood the ruined church, while along the village street were the battered remnants of *estaminets* and farm-houses. A broad-gauge railway had recently been constructed through the valley; for station it boasted a row of sandbagged dug-outs. By the line of dug-outs stood the ramp from which the Tanks had been detrained; flanking it the shattered stumps of a few trees, remnants of a large

plantation, strove bravely to show green signs of life. Down the road the Tanks themselves loomed out of the mist, queer shapes, in keeping with the unearthly desolation of the scene. A light railway line ran across the valley; following it, the eye was led to the farther ridge, which showed white-tipped; here were the old chalk-cut front line trenches, now used as training ground for H.M. Landships.

Among the Tanks there was soon a stir, and a movement. Stiff with cold, and blear-eyed with sleep, the crews set about warming up some breakfast in preparation for their early start. Tosh lifted his head, where he lay between the tracks of his bus, accepted a cup of coffee from his servant, rose, and saluted the sun with a hearty yawn. Before long the beneficient primus stoves had produced hot Maconochie and bacon; the officers settled down near the source of supplies, and dealt with them according to their lights.

"Hell, wasn't it cold!" exclaimed the R.O. "I say, skipper," addressing the second in command, "you don't want me on this fake, do you? The route's as plain as a pikestaff, and most of these lads have been over it before. If I may, I'll stay here and get a decent snack at the *estaminet*; I can

always persuade the Yanks to give me a lift on their light railway."

"All right, Uriah Z." replied the second in command, "just as you like. Personally, I'm going over by car. The Major will be through at 10—he slept at —— last night, and is coming on this morning. There'll be room for you, but not for your kit."

"That's the stuff," responded Uriah. "Thank God I'm not one of these poor —— who have to look after their heavily-armoured cars. Cheerioh, you chaps, and thanks for the breakfast. I'm going back to bed."

Breakfast over, the crews packed up their kits, and set off along the route. The track from here to the training centre was all cross-country, and countless Tanks had pounded it to a broad flat mud-path. In the first two miles, there was only one possibility of trouble where a broad and unrevetted communication-trench crossed the route. The parapet and parados had been pushed in so as almost to fill the trench; but one of the buses, being carelessly driven, discovered too late that the filling material was soft mud, and buried her nose in several feet of it. Any attempt to go forward would land her completely in the mud, while her tracks could not grip to pull her out backwards. There was

nothing for it but a tow. The following bus hitched on with a tow-rope, stern to stern, and with a steady pull extracted the unfortunate, covered to the eyebrows in liquid mud.

"Well, by ——," ejaculated her disgusted commander, "if you'd told me I *could* have stuck in that ditch, I'd have called you a —— liar."

From here there was for some time but little incident. The route ran in a small depression between cultivated fields; the surface being slippery mud, there was no need to guide the Tanks, which no sooner climbed one of the sloping sides of the track than they were automatically returned to the fairway in the hollow. Having nothing better to do, Tosh, who to-day was inside his bus, pushed up a periscope through the roof and surveyed his surroundings in comfort. As often before, he was smitten with a longing to have a cinema-man film the scene. There was something at once ludicrous and awe-inspiring in the sight of the antediluvian monstrosities, spouting, steaming and smoking, puffing, snorting and clattering, for all the world like uneasy products of Jurassic slime, as they proceeded with the maximum of noise and bustle at a speed of quite four miles an hour! No wonder the first sight of the Tanks

reduced the Army to the verge of apoplexy. The crews themselves, with every reason for profound melancholy in their knowledge of the "contrairy nature of the beast," could not but treat these monsters as a joke—until the day when their half-inch of plating was all that stood between them and death!

They were now drawing near their destination. As they breasted a hill, they came in view of a little ruined village in the lap of the valley, where trees which had somehow escaped destruction lined the banks of a muddy stream. On the further slope of the valley was displayed an astonishing spectacle. By Sections and by Companies, by Battalions and by Brigades, in Quarter Column and in Mass, lay serried rows of Tanks, more Tanks than Tosh had seen in his life before, while along the route ahead more Tanks were moving to the assembly, and on the near horizon yet more Tanks disported themselves on the old trench-system. Here was no attempt at camouflage, but an open challenge to the Boche: "Tanks? Yes, we have Tanks, and we mean to use them. Like to see a few? Certainly," and from all quarters they came, the Gathering of the Clans of the Trade by Land. Tosh's heart

swelled as he looked at them, and filled with speechless emotion.

"Hell!" he ejaculated, and again "Hell!"

The Company now began a long down-hill run into the village. The buses here accomplished fully eight miles an hour, though their tracks clattered as though they would jump the guides. By a dexterous manoeuvre, which very nearly landed him in a 10-ft. ditch, Tosh took second place just before the narrowing road precluded any further attempts at overtaking. Soberly now, and keeping to the right of the road, they filed past the church, round the village green, and up a little road to the Company Park.

The journey now over, the Tanks drew up by sections in their appointed place, one of innumerable parks in that teeming zoo. Tarpaulins were stretched over the tracks, and kits unloaded; the crews fell in and were marched off to the tents already erected by an advance party. The officers having selected both tents and tent-fellows, kits were laid out, and Tosh strolled off with Herr Von to inspect the new Mess.

The advance party had done their work well. Not only had they acquired a supply of perfectly good duckboards for the camp, but they had seized upon the only house in

the village which boasted a roof. True, a 5.9 had punctured the said roof, but a tarpaulin stretched over the hole rendered the place a very home from home. "*Bon*," said Tosh. "*Bon*," agreed Herr Von, and together they drank good luck to the P.M.C. and confusion to his mess-bills.

In Company Orders that evening appeared a detailed scheme of training for the next week. A certain portion of the trench-system had been allotted to the Company. Crews were to parade every morning at 8 a.m., and proceed to the training ground, where they would remain until 3.30, the last hour 3.30 to 4.30 being occupied in filling up for the next day.

Training was to be "intensive," and was designed to give all drivers thorough practice in trench-work (after a long sojourn amid the shell-holes of Ypres) in preparation for a probable offensive. Officers would give all drivers their due share of driving, would insist on strict compliance with service conditions, and would in every case select the most difficult ground available.

With this active life before them, Tank Commanders were not long in seeking their virtuous couches !

CHAPTER VI

AT PLAY

NEXT morning, after a hurried breakfast, the crews duly paraded at 8 o'clock, and by 8.15 the Tanks were on the move to their playground on the top of the ridge. It may be thought curious that an old and seasoned battalion should require a week's training in driving. The explanation consists partly in the fact that heavy casualties in the salient, particularly among first drivers, had caused some considerable shuffling of duties among the old hands and a drafting in of new details. But, in any case, Tank-driving is not the simple business it would appear to be, and constant practice is essential.

The popular idea, largely due to the praiseworthy efforts of sundry newspaper correspondents, is that a Tank has merely to be set going, and it will "carry on independent." Should a tree be encountered the Tank pushes it over, a house is carelessly thrust on one side, while a trench is not so much as observed by the sublime crustacean.

Alas, how different is the reality! It is true that a Tank can push over any ordinary

tree (strict orders being invariably issued that trees useful for camouflage must *not* be knocked over); but, should it do so carelessly, the resulting stump will not only ditch it, but may permanently damage its interior. A wall, if it be not too stout, can be demolished; but Heaven help the unwary Tank which enters the usual type of house boasting both a cellar and a well! And in the actual crossing of a trench, the daily task of the Tank and its *raison d'être*, the most scrupulous care is necessary.

Given good driving and a firm revetment, and our faithful beast will cross almost any trench; but let the driver make the slightest error of alignment, and the bus will heel sideways and be ditched for hours. Let it not be forgotten that a trench in actual practice is not a straight line or even a geometrical figure; it is a bewildering maze of traverse and communication trench, of machine gun and trench mortar emplacements, of dug-outs and O-Pips, any one of which is sufficient to engulf a Tank for all eternity. This formidable obstacle does not always boast firmly-revetted sides; more often they consist of crumbling mud, in which the tracks slip instead of gripping. Nor can a jumping place be calmly and carefully chosen from a

comfortable coign of vantage; the Tank Commander and the driver must contrive to choose one amid a hellish crackling of bullets half an inch from their noses, in a shower of red-hot splinters, by squinting through periscopes which are invariably hit and smashed, or by peeping over gun-sights which may admit a bullet at any moment, in face of a well-nigh invisible foe, to whom they are an outstanding target for miles. No wonder, then, that Tank-driving is an art, that good first-drivers are rare and cherished possessions, and that "train whenever opportunity offers" is the motto of the Corps.

Tosh had been lucky in keeping his old first driver, consequently he devoted most of his attention to his second and third drivers. In common with most of his fellows, he made it a rule never to spend a day without being ditched at least once. "Ditched," it may be explained, is not synonymous with "stuck." A Tank which is stuck must be towed or dug out, but a Tank which is ditched can usually be extracted under its own power by use of unditching gear. This consists of a 100-lb. beam of wood which can be hitched on to the tracks, and passing under the belly will pull the bus out of many an awkward place. The attaching of the beam necessitates two men

climbing out of the bus, but, owing to the protection afforded by her stern, the operation can be, and frequently has been, performed under fire.

Day now followed day without much to differentiate them. In the morning, Tank 2597 would sally forth bright and early, crossing first a railway ramp, then a thirty-foot deep ravine lined with dug-outs, an obstacle whose width rendered it easy of passage, the slope being hardly more than 1 in 1. Next she would encounter in succession the reserve, support, and front-line of the British system. Into these she would scarcely dip her nose; for here, as ever, the British dug lightly, while the Boche dug deep. It was after crossing no man's land that she would meet her troubles.

The trenches here were cut in chalk, and frequently went down twenty feet, while from parapet to parados they measured at least twelve. Having chosen his spot with the utmost care, the driver would bring her nose gently forward over the trench till he felt her begin to swing; then throwing out his clutch, ease her down until with a crunch she landed on the opposite wall, her deck at a slope of thirty degrees, and the view from the front flaps "mud—pure mud." Then, letting

in his clutch, he would bring her gently up till a thud told him that her tail was on the fire-step. Then would come the crucial moments. Craning his neck to peer through the flap, which then gave on nothing but blue sky, he would throttle well up; for a palpitating second or two she would hang undecided 'twixt sky and earth, her deck at 50 degrees and her crew hanging on by tooth and claw; then, with an easy motion, she would swing over the crest, the driver at first sight of earth easing her until with a gentle thump she landed again on an even keel.

So much for the ideal crossing. But, as has been mentioned, nothing varies more in width and slope than a trench; all sorts of complications are introduced by dug-outs and emplacements; and Tosh invariably succeeded in getting ditched once a day by attempting possible, but not probable, crossings.

On one occasion, when he was making for no man's land in order to stop for lunch, he approached a wide, but fairly shallow trench, with a deep gaping dug-out to the left. He did not trouble to swing, judging that he would safely miss; but unfortunately the ground over the mouth of the dug-out was soft. As

the Tank crossed, it gradually heeled over, while the left track, as it went round, tore away more and more of the indispensable margin of safety.

Muttering, "Don't go down the mine, daddy," Tosh stopped, and got out to consider the position. Useless to try the unditching beam; a drop into that cavern might well be a permanent halt; nothing for it but a tow. Accordingly he dispatched a man to fetch the nearest Tank.

Meanwhile a dear old white-haired gentleman had made an unobserved approach. He wore on his shoulders crossed swords, whereat Tosh saluted; he wore on his face a friendly smile, whereat Tosh said, "Good morning, sir," Forthwith they fell into friendly converse one with the other. The Brigadier, it appeared, was Chief Claims Officer for the area. He had never seen a Tank before, and noticing one from the road had left his car and came across to see it. He showed the most flattering interest in all Tosh had to say; and, on the approach of Herr Von's Tank to give a tow, chuckled with pure delight as, with a heave, she pulled her unfortunate friend out of her awkward situation.

"The most interesting thing I've ever seen," declared the Brigadier. "I wouldn't

have missed it for anything. Thank you so much!" and he departed as pleased as a child.

"As though I'd —— well ditched myself for him to see me pulled out," commented Tosh to Herr Von as they munched Army biscuits and cheese. "Still, I love entertaining the old dears and, thanks to you, there's no harm done. But, blazes, supposing I had gone down into that blasted pit!"

For all his love of adventure, Tosh did not actually go down any "blasted pit"; and it was left to another number of the Company to perform the finest ditching feat in its history.

At one point in the line there was a triangle of trench enclosing a pond. The gentleman in question crossed the base of the triangle, and was then faced with a difficult problem in Tank-tactics. If he reversed, his chances of getting across the trench were very problematical; if he went forward, everything depended on the depth of the pond. He was unwise enough to prefer the hidden danger.

With a merry squelching his Tank put her nose down and crawled forward. Every foot forward seemed to mean a foot deeper into liquid mud, until finally the water began to bubble through the holes in her flooring.

At this point, violent efforts were made to reverse, but it was too late; the rising tide had reached the carburettor, and with a gasp the engine died. Even this achievement did not satisfy the envious flood; gradually it rose until the crew, fearful of drowning like rats in a trap, crawled through the man-hole in the roof, and stood, a piteous sight, shipwrecked amid a sea of mud.

Unluckily for the Commander, he had strayed to an unfrequented part of the course. In the fast-failing evening light never a sail could he spy across all the leagues of mud. With a sigh he made up his mind. Leaving one man to stay with the ship, he gathered his crew together, and one by one they leapt from the friendly platform, waist-deep into ooze, and waded to shore.

Half an hour later a shamefaced young officer reported his plight to the second in command. "Damn it, man," was his comment, "you ought to be in the Inland Water Transport!" As the story went round, inextinguishable laughter arose from all the tents (officers for the use of) of the host, and excursion parties were immediately organized: "Sixpence to row round the stranded Tank by moonlight."

The Major, however, saw little occasion

for mirth in the situation. He was proud of being in command of the best Company of the best Battalion in the Corps, and he foresaw endless chaffing if the story once got about. Further, he considered this a splendid opportunity for exhibiting that cast-iron discipline for which he would fain be famous. Accordingly, he applied the standing order that crews of ditched Tanks will in all cases remain with their Tank until ordered to abandon it, thus dooming our friend to a cheerless night in some dug-out in the old Boche line. A special order was issued to all ranks forbidding mention of the occurrence, while, early next morning, two Tanks sallied forth, and, pulling in tandem, dragged the unfortunate from its inglorious position.

Shortly after, volunteers were asked for to man a new type of Tank—desiderata, intrepidity and experience. The first to be recommended by the Major was the hero of the episode of the subaqueous Tank.

In such strenuous but amusing fashion a week quickly slipped by. At its close mysterious rumours began to circulate, in the way rumours have, concerning a new unditching device. Details gradually began to be heard. Others besides Tosh had observed the huge bundle of sticks carried on a

Tank at Central Workshops; this, it was stated, was the new "Tank fascine," to be carried on the cab of the Tank and dropped into any trench or water which appeared too deep to cross.

"C" Company were unanimous in describing this idea as piffle. In their experience it was not the depth of a trench, but the depth of the mud in the bottom or the softness of the walls which caused Tanks to stick; and neither of these difficulties could very well be foreseen. Besides, a colossal bundle of wood, if securely fixed, would take a good deal of dropping, whereas, if it was insecurely fixed, it would fall off at the first bump. And to go to so much trouble for a device which could only be used once appeared ridiculous.

Notwithstanding this unanimity, the rumour persisted. It was now stated that a fascine was already on show at the Driving School two miles off, and that shortly they would be issued to all Tanks. The matter had now definitely passed beyond the realm of pure fancy; consequently no one was surprised, though many were pained, when a supplement to Company Orders gave full details of the New Tank Fascine.

The fascine, it appeared, was composed

of seventy-two ordinary road-fascines bound together by chains, the resulting bundle weighing one and a half tons. Its inception was due to the habit the Boche had lately developed of digging his trenches very wide, probably as Tank-traps; for it was thought that a load of one and a half tons of wood, standing four feet high, dropped even in the ugliest trench, would go far to render it practicable. The fascine was provided with two chains, by means of which it could be hitched on to the tracks and pulled up on to the cab. In travelling it was to be carried securely fastened; but, before action, would be tilted forward until nothing but an iron hook one inch thick held it from falling. At the psychological moment, a lever inside would release the hook, and the fascine would drop neatly into the trench. A demonstration would be given next day by the Brigade Fascine Officer.

Loud and long raged the argument in mess that night. One man was obsessed with the awful prospect before Tank Commanders of leading Tanks into action in the dark with one and a half tons impending over them, and only prevented from falling on their devoted heads by a movable hook one inch thick.

"Damn it all," he remarked with heat, "we'll have to put barbed wire on the lever, or they'll squash us flat when they think they're locking the diff."

"Yes," agreed another, "and it's not as though we didn't cause enough trouble already pulling down overhead signal-cables, without having four feet of superstructure to help with the good work. Besides, how the hell are we to travel with them? The railway people won't allow a four-foot bundle on top of our buses; we'd wreck every bridge and signal in the place."

"Aha!" cried the R.O., "I have special information on that point. It will all be explained to you to-morrow. You drop your fascine on the truck in front of you before you start, and pick it up again before detraining."

"My Gawd," commented Tosh, "a nice job at two ak emma on a cold morning, with no lights allowed and a six-hour drive ahead of you! I'll have something to say to that Brigade Fascinator!"

A shout of laughter greeted the new title, and word was quickly passed that Tosh had made another of his jokes. Ordinarily a somewhat morose individual, he was given to unexpected flashes of wit. This particular

bon mot was felt to supply a need, and in a day or two the very brigadiers were to be heard asking petulantly for "my fascinator."

The name gained added point at the demonstration next day. The fascinator proved to be a finicky little man with glasses, who bore all the marks of an ex-schoolmaster. When the officers and first drivers of the Battalion had gathered round him, he opened the proceedings with a lengthy, if eloquent, description of the trials and difficulties experienced by the early Tank crews in negotiating trenches. These remarks would no doubt have produced a greater impression on an audience not composed almost entirely of those early crews. Passing deftly to present conditions, he mentioned that, from intelligence received, the Boche was now digging his trenches even wider, as a precaution against Tanks, and explained that in consequence a certain Major had devised a fascine to be carried on the Tank to assist in crossing these super-trenches. He then described, carefully and minutely, the construction and use of the fascine.

His audience had already absorbed this information from Company Orders, and were by now thoroughly chilled by the evening breeze. Consequently it is to be feared that,

when the fascinator proceeded to practical blandishments, he did not receive that polite attention he doubtless merited. In fact, being unused to command, and exceedingly unused to the command of a Tank, he became so involved in orders and counter-orders to the men outside, coupled with signals and counter-signals to the drivers inside, that it was a full half-hour before, amid subdued but derisive cheers, the huge fascine was majestically lifted into the air and deposited upon the cab of the Tank.

But this was far from being the end of the show. The written instructions laid it down that great care must be taken to ensure (1) that the fascine rested on the flat portion specially provided for that purpose, and (2) that the fascine was accurately centred with the Tank. The demonstrator was not the man to disobey the letter of the law. Under his orders, two men climbed upon the back of the Tank and, with short baulks of timber, propped between the fascine and the track, which was rotated back or forward as might be desired, for a full half-hour they manoeuvred the bundle up and down on its uneasy perch, until at length, amid the apathetic indifference of the instructed, the instructor declared himself satisfied.

As a grand finale, the fascine was eased forward into the "fighting position"; the driver inside touched the lever and, with a terrific bump, the fascine fell to the ground.

"Well, by ——," was Tosh's comment, "if we've got to go through that job entraining and detraining, in the dark, on top of an open truck, and then go forward with that bundle of firewood tilting over threatening to drop on us at every bump, all I can say is, Gawd help the poor Tank Commander!"

CHAPTER VII

REHEARSALS

NEXT day the Major called his officers together, and lifted slightly the veil of secrecy which so far had obscured their future doings. An attack was shortly to be made on a certain sector; an attack in which Tanks would play a very important part. Exteme secrecy was essential to success; given that secrecy success of an unusual brilliance was, humanly speaking, inevitable (we do not quote the Major's own words, which were more after this fashion: "Damme, keep your mouths shut and it's an absolute sitter.") That very afternoon would be held the first of two practice attacks with the infantry who would co-operate with them in the real thing.

Now that the subject was no longer taboo, there was a lot of excited speculation as to where the attack would be made, and what it portended. That it was no minor show was clear from the number of battalions who would take part, also from the name of the division with whom "C" Company was to co-operate. The prospect of an attack is not invariably a cause for congratulation, but,

in this case, the Battalion had so long been out of action, and their last show had been so full of difficulties and disappointments, that officers and men alike were delighted at the prospect of "getting Jerry on the hop."

At two o'clock that afternoon "C" Company set forth in line ahead to the rendezvous, some two miles off. At the first jump they encountered a Company from another Battalion, bound in the same direction, and there ensued some slight bickering at the cross-roads. The other Company were being escorted by their Colonel in person, and he saw fit to uplift a stentorian voice in reproof of "C" Company blocking his way.

Now it is a remarkable property of a Tank that, whereas all orders delivered from outside to the crew inside, no matter how they are shouted, are almost inaudible, the slightest whisper of the crew inside is as audible outside as if it had been shouted through a megaphone. Tosh had often reminded his crew of this fact, and reproved them for undue expressions of their opinions concerning his orders, but, on the present occasion he rejoiced exceedingly to hear a foghorn voice exclaim, "Damn the silly old ——, does he think his bunch have bought the place? Why, we'd squashed our hundredth

pill-box before his young lads had finished buying their rainbows at Harrods."

The Colonel half-turned, and for an awful moment Tosh awaited the outburst, but none came, and they proceeded unreproved on their way.

Soon they arrived at the jumping-off point, and drew up in line facing four rows of flags which distinguished respectively the first, second, third and final objectives. The infantry having arrived, the crews of the Tanks actively fraternised with their platoons what time the officers synchronised their watches. The infantry then retired 200 yards behind the Tanks, the crews climbed in, and machine-guns were thrust through the mountings.

Precisely at zero, the line of Tanks moved majestically forward, crushing great swathes of wire, and advanced to the first objective. At their signal, the infantry doubled up and occupied the trench, whereupon the Tanks proceeded to the next objective. To a spectator, the scene may have been realistic and impressive; to the participants it was too tame to be even amusing. The last objective having been successfully assailed, the infantry fell in and marched off, while the Tanks

wandered off to amuse themselves a little before coming home to roost.

That evening, to their intense surprise, "C" Company were informed that their practice, elementary as it had been, had indicated to the Staff several weak points in their plans. These would be rectified, and secret instructions might shortly be expected. Meanwhile, "carry on as before."

The Company, however, had become rather tired of wandering aimlessly over ground of which they already knew every inch. Accordingly, a plan was made to hold a race meeting, with a prize of five francs to the first crew home, and another of ten francs to the driver who gained most points for style.

The course was duly set with flags at an early hour next morning. By special arrangement, a portion of the line belonging to another Company had been borrowed for the occasion; besides being unknown to the drivers, this had the additional advantage of having been heavily shelled. Beginning in no man's land, the course crossed five particularly nasty trenches in quick succession, space being allowed at the jumps for two Tanks only at a time. It then described a half-circle on a steep slope, and returned by the way it had come. Finally, each Tank

had to describe a figure of eight without making a stop.

Ten minutes before the start, all crews are hard at work getting their charges into fighting trim. One Commander can be seen running slowly backwards and forwards, oiling his tracks; another is greasing his gears; a third drying his brake bands, and so forth. Finally, all line up at the starting-point; the starter drops his flag, and they are off.

The first anxiety, as may be imagined, is to be first at the gap. This is largely a matter of starting in a straight line for it, every subsequent adjustment of direction entailing a loss of speed. Imagine a youthful veteran, frantic with eagerness, shut up in a sardine-tin, which cannot be forced to travel faster than five miles an hour, and you will have a fairly accurate picture of Tosh. Here, when there is no opportunity of manoeuvre, he can hardly sit his seat he is so impatient.

Gradually the throng begins to separate out, Tosh running third; the Tanks run up to the first jump, change gear, and slowly put their noses into the trench. No racing here, for a judge observes every movement, and every bump means a mark off the total for the higher prize. Tosh's driver, by a

masterly gear-change, pulls up level with the second Tank. Neck and neck the two amphibians dip their noses, climb slowly to an angle of forty-five, swing gently down again into the second dip (for this is a hog-back), climb again, settle on an even keel, change gears, and dash off again after the leader.

The ground here has been shelled, and the Tanks are never for an instant on level keels. Dipping, lifting, slithering, bumping, they race to the second gap and cross it. The next jump is a communication trench at an angle to the first two and to the right. Tosh, being on the left, the necessary swing throws him back to third again, and until the homeward journey begins he has no opportunity of pulling up.

At the last jump of the outward stretch, which is also the first jump of the home stretch, some ten Tanks are jumbled together at the gap. When it is remembered that a Tank does not turn and advance at the same time, but swings bodily in changing direction, and that no one driver can see any of his opponents' faces, it can be imagined what a riot of confusion reigns as the two streams meet, and what a picture these queer craft present to the perplexed judges, the leaders

dipping and climbing successively at all angles with the sky, while those in the rear swing restlessly right and left in a vain endeavour to find a space. Very quickly the tangle sorts itself, showing the original leader well ahead, next two Tanks almost level, of whom Tosh is slightly ahead, and after them a string who hope to gain by good driving what they have inevitably lost as regards speed. At the next jump Tosh, according to usual practice, changes down to second speed. But his rival, noticing that the parapet has been considerably flattened by the passage of so many steam rollers, dashes gaily on in third, dips his nose, meets the trench wall with a bang, climbs laboriously out, picks up speed and is off, leaving Tosh gaping. But all is not over between them. Taking a leaf out of his enemy's book, Tosh attacks the shelled ground, not in third, in which it can be easily taken, but in fourth. Now a Tank in fourth has no climbing power; accordingly all shell-holes must be rushed. Luckily the ground is soft, but, even so, the jolts and jars endured by the crew of Tank 2597 are enough to dislocate their collar-bones. Not for nothing are they endured. At the final jump Tosh is again level, and, in virtue of his

drivers' skill in quick gear-changing, runs second past the post.

The final test, a figure of eight without a stop, is more difficult than it appears, for reasons not unconnected with the type of bus in use at the time; but it is smoothly and successfully accomplished. Tosh then draws up at the starting-point, and stops his engine. The crew tumble out, and proceed to chip the winners on their "blinking aeryoplane," while they watch the belated arrival of the "also rans."

The judges now meet to decide upon their award. The first prize presents no difficulty and has been won by the driver usually cited as the best in the Battalion. The second and larger prize, however, for good driving, is not so easily awarded.

The first Tank in, it appears, did not succeed in completing the figure of eight without a stop. Of the next two, there is some divergence of opinion as to whether Tosh or his rival was more correct in his manner of taking the C.–T. jump. Tosh, it will be remembered, took it slowly and smoothly; his rival took it bumpily but fast. Finally, it is decided to divide the prize between the two; Tosh's driver therefore receives five

francs, and immediate plans are made for a celebration in the nearest *estaminet*.

Next day, at lunch, typed sheets, marked "Secret," were distributed to all the officers. They proved to be detailed orders explaining the new method of attack, both from the Tank and from the infantry point of view. The officers immediately set to work to get them by heart, discussing together all doubtful points and obtaining explanation where necessary. The instructions dealt with co-operation with the infantry, and fixed a code of signals; they also gave definite and stringent directions concerning the use of fascines. Finally, the Major announced that next day the revised plan would be practised in full detail, except for the use of actual fascines; while after the practice twenty of the infantry officers would be entertained in mess. The R.O.'s comment being "Hell! Some blind!"

Next morning, after a short, explanatory address to the men, the Tanks moved off to their rendezvous, passing on their way the field-kitchens of the brigade they were to work with. Punctually, as they took their allotted places, the infantry deployed behind them; watches were checked, and all was ready.

The ground had been chosen with great care, so that the obstacles to be met with in the actual attack were represented in the practice at approximately the correct distances. The wire, too, had been untouched by salvage parties; consequenty the infantry, in order to pass it, must follow out their detailed instructions.

Zero came, and the Tanks moved forward across no man's land. From beginning to end everything went without a hitch. Direction was kept, distance was maintained, the new and complicated fascine-evolutions were correctly performed. Three hours of steady work saw the infantry cold, while the Tank crews were hot, but all alike were confident of success as soon as their chance was given them.

Down at the mess that evening the officers, arrayed for the nonce in slacks and shoes instead of breeches and gum-boots, were awaiting their guests. The invitation had been issued from Major to Colonels with the idea that fraternization would thereby be assisted and good feeling between the co-operating arms be ensured. The Mess-President, as a further step towards ensuring this good feeling and co-operation, had

obtained from canteens far and wide a two-ton lorry load of Scottish milk.

At five minutes to seven the Jocks arrived, and an appetiser was partaken of. The two parties then sorted themselves out into groups according to the part each was to take in the coming attack, with the result that when they sat down to dinner each Tank Commander was next to the platoon commander who would be following him into action in a few days time. The circumstances, and the whisky, were propitious; fraternization proceeded at an unprecedented rate; and co-operation was so far ensured that in a short time many a platoon commander had his arm round the neck of his mate of the Tanks, while together they made completely successful attacks on bottle after bottle of "the creature."

Were we living in a freer and less decorous age, when it was the part of a gentleman to require assistance to his couch, it might be recorded that, though the Colonels and Majors retired at eleven, wassail continued in the great hall till two next morning; that the visitors were carried one by one to their lorry and dumped in it without a groan of protest; while the hosts staggered shouting and singing to bed, each under the guidance

of two lusty batmen. As it is, the simple statement will suffice, that parade next morning was called, not at eight, but at eleven, and that before that hour there was much brewing of coffee in officers' tents.

CHAPTER VIII

MOVING UP

THE Battalion was now complete, and co-operation with the infantry had been practised. Consequently, it was not long before orders were received to entrain for some destination unknown.

From this time forward every move must be made at night, and every precaution taken to preserve secrecy; but, as the journey to railhead was on a constantly used route, the Company set off at two o'clock one afternoon. Sponsons, by a special dispensation, were to to be left out.

As usual, the Tanks were loaded sky-high with all manner of merchandise. As usual, the proceedings took the form of a race-meeting. The particular incentive this time was first choice of the fascines which were to be picked up before entraining.

The matter of picking up a fascine had all the appearance of a simple business. But when Tosh arrived to inspect the goods, he was confronted with a confused bunch of bundles of wood, all liberally encrusted with thick mud, and all apparently in that state

of shapeless decay against which the fascinator had specifically warned him. Making his choice from among these dilapidated wrecks, he brought his Tank up, nose on, and scraped away the mud to find the necessary links. After some five minutes of this unpleasant work, he discovered the links to be underneath the fascine. His faithful bus was not long in rolling the bundle over; Tosh then found he was on the wrong side. Meanwhile another bus had come up to a fascine close by and completely blocked the way round. Tosh gave his monster a bun and told it to be quiet for a few minutes.

The obstructing Tank, having finished its part of the performance, gracefully backed out of the way; Tosh got busy, and in a short time his ton of sticks was secured weirdly, but adequately, up aloft. The crew then broke off, and Tosh repaired to the local estaminet for an omelet and *pommes de terre frites*.

"C" Company's train was due to arrive at 9 o'clock. By 8.45 the Tanks were stretched in two lines along the road, ready to entrain by the two ramps simultaneously. By 10 a R.T.O. had arrived to issue instructions for what had already been done. By 10.30 the train had arrived, and by 10.45 the

business of entraining had definitely begun.

Entraining at night when lights are allowed is a simple matter. The Tank Commander keeps his torch directed on one track. According as the space between the track and the edge of the truck increases or diminishes beyond the correct nine inches, so does he signal with his torch for left or right brake. None the less, the succession of weird shapes, flickeringly illuminated by torch-light and gun-flashes as they crunch their way along a narrow platform four feet in air, form a sufficiently picturesque spectacle. The local R.T.O., being apparently new to the job, must have thought it dangerous as well, and made himself particularly objectionable; but a few perfectly audible whispered comments by Tosh's crew soon put him to flight, and Tosh found his truck without difficulty.

The real business of the evening then began —dropping the fascines on to the trucks in front of the Tanks. From the amount of breathless profanity which rose into the night from up and down the train, it might have been judged that hopeless and helpless confusion reigned; but this would not have been a true deduction, for within half an hour every Tank had gently deposited its

burden in front of it, and was chocked up securely for the journey.

Up to this point there had been no faintest indication, though there had been many guesses, as to the Company's destination. But when the officers had collected in their carriage, word went round that to-night they would only do half the journey, lying up next day in a wood; to-morrow night they would go by train to railhead and then drive some eight miles to another wood a mile behind the front line. "And from there," explained the second in command, "we poop off into the blue."

Meanwhile the train had got under way. It appeared that for two nights this portion of the railway system had been entirely reserved for Tanks; accordingly there were none of the usual interminable halts at intermediate stations; and, the train having been "whacked up" to a useful twenty miles an hour, they arrived at their detraining point at three ak emma, the chilliest hour of a chilly morning. A thick ground mist had arisen, making it intensely dark; and an order had been issued that lights must be shown as little as possible. It was with no particular joy that the crews turned out to their cheerless task.

Cheerless indeed it proved to be. The chains of the fascines were clammy and intensely cold. The crews fumbled desperately with bolts and nuts, sucking their frozen, muddy fingers, and cursing breathlessly in the peopled dark. Engines were difficult to start, gears were stiff, chocks were jammed—everything conspired to make a difficult task more difficult. And, when the fascines were at last lifted and secured, there was still the slow and laborious work of detraining without lights.

However, all evils have an end. A time came when the last Tank had lumbered off the train, slithered across the half-mile of mud, and nosed its way carefully into the luxuriant and thorny undergrowth of the little wood. Camouflage nets were drawn over the Tanks; bivvies were constructed of spare tarpaulins, and the weary crews dropped off to sleep.

Tosh was awakened earlier than he could have wished by an all-pervading chill. Seeing no prospect of breakfast for some time, he rose and viewed the countryside.

The wood into which they had driven the night before was now full of Tanks, which had crushed ways in all directions through the undergrowth. Walking down one of

these ways, and leaping such occasional trenches and dug-outs as it crossed, he arrived at the edge of the wood and proceeded to take his bearings.

Across his front ran the railway by which they had arrived, the detraining ramp showing clearly away to the left. Immediately beyond the line, and parallel with it, ran a straight road, while through the trees lining it it could be seen that the ground fell sharply to an invisible valley.

Tosh strolled across the line. As he approached the road, he was struck by a certain familiarity in the general aspect of the country. Now French country, whether strafed or unstrafed, is apt to repeat itself. If strafed, the features are mud and mangled trees; if unstrafed, there is invariably a a wood and a straight tree-lined road. Tosh was well aware of this peculiarity, and it was not till he was fairly on the road and looking across the valley, that all doubts were removed, as he recognised the very trench in which for a month he had lived so uncomfortably. Since those earlier days there had been attacks and retreats; the front-line was now some fifteen miles away. As Tosh thought of the good friends who were with him in that trench, whom he would never

see again, he had a foretaste of the mixed feelings with which, "*après la guerre*," we shall revisit our ancient battle-fields.

The sun being now well above the horizon, Tosh returned to find breakfast awaiting him.

"Hullo, you chaps," he greeted his fellow-officers, "do you know where we've got to? We're only about six miles south-east of ——. Pity we'll be busy to-day; there's a *bon estaminet* over there."

"Damn good job you will be busy," replied Herr Von, "you'd be getting into mischief, and enjoying yourself as if there wasn't a war on."

Busy the crews undoubtedly were that day. It was their last chance of free movement by day, and any further time for preparation was likely to be short. Furthermore, fascines were to be carried in position during the final move, and must now be adjusted so as to require the minimum of attention before action. It was not till five that crews were dismissed, with orders to be ready to entrain again at ten.

At ten the Company moved out of the wood, and took up a strategic position opposite the ramp, which was for the nonce entirely innocent of Tank trucks. The night

was clear and bitterly cold, with a north-east wind. The crews had had about six hours sleep out of the last forty-eight, and were consequently in the right state of mind to enjoy the hours of hanging about which seemed to be before them.

News soon circulated of an accident along the line, which would delay their entraining for two hours. On receipt of this cheering information, the crews gathered together to have company in their misery. Then some individual, one of our nameless heroes, had a heaven-sent inspiration. The countryside was littered with empty petrol-boxes. At his suggestion these were collected in the dip of a sunken road, a light was put to them, and in five minutes the entire Company was dozing contentedly round a flaming bonfire, which, as Tosh sleepily murmured, was indeed *bon*. True, faces were scorched while backs were freezing, and there was not seating accommodation for all; but on such a night 'twas bliss to be even sectionally warm, and there is a stage of weariness at which standing ceases to be an effort. In fact, it was with profound regret that the Company heard of the arrival of their train at 12.45 a.m., and, abandoning the glowing coals of the fire, started up their engines and drove on to the train.

A curious fact was now revealed. It appeared that the whole Tank Corps in France was on the move that night, while there were only a limited number of special Tank trucks. The older and more experienced battalions, therefore, were to travel on ordinary heavy-gun trucks; and with a mixture of annoyance and amusement the veterans recognised those queer, humped trucks on which the first Tanks were conveyed. At each end of these trucks was a beam, which each Tank must jump, and, as there was quite a wide gap between successive trucks, the chances of the Tank side-slipping over the edge were not as minute as one could have wished.

As ever with the Trade by Land, care was the secret; and before long all buses were safely entrained. The crews sent up a pious thanksgiving that for this journey sponsons might be left out, and fascines be carried on the cab. Further, tarpaulins need not be unrolled, crews would travel with their Tanks, and engines might, if so desired, be kept running. These indications of a short trip were not belied, and within two hours the train halted, and after some shunting the trucks were run up against a detraining ramp.

Orders had been issued forbidding lights;

and, from what they had been told, the officers knew that they were not far from the line. But, if so, it was an unusually quiet part of the line. The silence was profound, and was only occasionally broken by the distant boom of a gun. They welcomed the change from the scene of their last show, where railhead was constantly bombed and shelled, where the sky was alight with gun-flashes and the air heavy with never-ceasing thunder.

Amid this unearthly silence, the Tanks crept carefully off the train on to a metalled road. Tank Commanders then received orders to collect at the ramp. Here they found the Major, who had arrived by car. He explained that they were five miles from the line, and would be in view of the enemy most of the way forward; nor must they suppose that because he was silent he was not watchful. There lay before them a nine-mile run; the time was then 3.30, and they must be in the wood before day broke at seven. The going being mostly flat grass-land, they must make all possible speed.

The subsequent run will always live in Tosh's memory as one of the longest three hours he ever spent. After a preliminary half-mile of road came a three-mile stretch of

absolutely featureless country. The sole visible landmark was the broad white tape marking their route; the sole variety an occasional star-shell in the distance. Walk he must in case of hidden pitfalls, but to a dog-tired man the monotony was almost insupportable.

Eventually they emerged again upon a road, and followed it for dreary miles. It was lined with trees which had not been trimmed for years; their branches almost met overhead, and Tosh had to be constantly on the watch lest his fascines be swept off the cab.

For an area where an offensive was brewing the roads were marvellously empty; but on this stretch they did pass a few limbers. The night was still too dark for clear seeing, but, as the east began slowly, and it seemed unwillingly, to lighten, Tosh noticed by the roadside carefully camouflaged gun-pits (as yet empty of guns) and covered stacks of ammunition. He was subsequently to discover that the whole country was "stiff" with gun-pits similarly empty, which never held a gun until a few hours before the fateful dawn of the offensive.

They had now been two hours on the run, and only an hour of safe movement remained.

Already the dawn was breaking, and Captain Alphen told Tosh that they were still a long way from home. But with the dawn came the solution of the difficulty—a heavy ground-mist of the type so common in the fall of the year. Even in so quiet a spot the Boche was sure to send over an early air-patrol, and, if Tanks were spotted, the whole secret would be given away. If only the mist would last, they could carry on until the safety of the wood should be reached.

At long length they reached the corner of the wood, and the crews imagined themselves to be near the end of their task. They were speedily disillusioned. It seemed that the wood stretched for nearly two miles parallel with the front line, and that it was in the farthest corner of the wood that they were to be hidden. With a weary, weary sigh, Tosh entered upon the last stage of his pilgrimage.

As they skirted the edge of the wood, which, though a mile from the line, was here almost untouched, they noticed more signs of a forthcoming attack. The wood itself was full of camps, all carefully camouflaged, while along the fringe were innumerable dumps, emplacements, and so forth. At one place was a casualty clearing station in embryo,

while no fewer than three light railways ran into the wood. It was sufficiently clear that operations had been well thought out, for not a wheel-track showed in the soft mud, and Alphen explained that arrangements had been made for the Tank tracks to be obliterated by the hoof-marks of the nearest horse-lines.

The ground mist was now beginning to thin, and there was some anxiety as to whether they could get in in time. Orders were given to stop and run into the wood immediately an aeroplane was heard; but no such incident occurred, and at 7.15 the Tanks arrived at the section of the wood set apart for their concealment. Tosh looked about for an entry. This did not immediately offer itself, for a row of pollarded willows grew along the fringe, the difficulty being not to get in—for trees are easily pushed over—but to get in without leaving a visible gap. At last he solved the difficulty by pushing a tree over, walking over it, and then pushing it up into place again with the rear downward slope of his track.

The crews then emerged, camouflaged up, and dropped straight off to sleep in the bivvies which the advance party had already erected for them.

CHAPTER IX

EXPECTATION

WHEN the officers had collected for lunch some hours later, they were issued with maps of the district. They discovered themselves to be less than a mile from the front line, and only two miles from a village in Boche hands, which, the R.O. assured them, still had a few roofs on its more fortunate houses. The idea of finding a mile from the line a wood which was still a wood, a village which was still a village, or even grass which was still grass, was at first incredible, the fact being that the Boche had retreated over this ground, and had since been left in peace. The real novelty was not so much there being such a spot, as the arrival of the Tank Corps in that spot; for, being entirely concerned with offensives, it had hitherto known only such parts of the line as had already received considerable attention from the grim hand of war.

The peaceful atmosphere of this corner of the war was indescribable. By day hardly a "boom" broke the heavy silence; even by night machine-guns chattered quite per-

functorily, star-shells were few and far between, and the flash of a gun was a rare event. Meanwhile the Tanks lay embowered in leafy growth, while high above them the trees met to screen them from prying eyes.

The day after the Company arrived, officers and N.C.O.'s went up to the front line to have a look round. For a short distance they proceeded up a small valley, the mouth of which was hung across with camouflage. Through this screen a view could be obtained of the village behind the Boche line. The R.O., who conducted the party, claimed that in one house he could even distinguish the shutters on the windows, but the village showed no sign of the troops who occupied it.

They then entered a communication-trench, cut in chalk, and beautifully revetted, with duck-boards along the bottom actually nailed down at each end. Proceeding along this, after three-quarters of a mile, they arrived at the reserve line—a system so neatly kept it appeared impossible it could be real. The troops occupying it were peacefully brewing tea; they were to be relieved before the attack, and for purposes of secrecy had not been informed of its imminence, while the Tank men had been warned to give no hint.

The route to the front line was as perplexing

as is usually the case, with innumerable forks and cross-routes; but before long the party arrived in the actual front line trench.

From previous experience, Tosh had been expecting to find a muddy and uncomfortable ditch, sparsely populated with weary sentries. Instead, they came into a perfect example of the traversed trench, revetted and duck-boarded, with neat shelters and bomb-stores all carefully labelled, furnished with a broad and convenient fire-step and inhabited by a number of imperturbable and immaculate Jocks, who greeted them with polite smiles and went on cleaning their rifles.

The visitors were by this time filled with amazed hilarity. But more was to come. The R.O. wished to show them the lie of the country. Instead of cautiously erecting a periscope and offering each in turn a peep he climbed on the fire-step, unconcernedly popped his head above the parapet, and invited them to come and have a look. Picture the scene, ye who have known front lines which were unsafe on hands and knees—two bays full of young officers, each with a map, gazing cheerfully across direct into the Boche line! What a crime was shortly to be perpetrated in spoiling such a soldier's paradise!

No man's land at this point was about twelve hundred yards across, though various saps ran out from each side; it was grassy and almost untouched by fire. On the crest of a small slope could be seen the Boche wire, known to be unusually thick. Behind his front line the ground dipped to a ravine, of which only the tops of the trees lining its streamlet were visible; but beyond it rose to a well-defined ridge, on which stood a village—their final objective. Consequently, as the front line was to be taken by another Company, almost the whole of the ground they were to cover lay exposed to view; and each officer busily impressed on his memory (and on that of his N.C.O.) the actual appearance of landmarks they had already studied on the map. Having previously been issued with aeroplane-photographs of the country, they knew the ground both by front elevation and by plan!

The condition of the ground was all that could be desired; landmarks were plentiful; trenches might be wide, but were not impassable; and it was with a very definite and justifiable optimism that "C" Company looked forward to the day so nearly approaching. They were in a mood to appreciate a parapet shown them which,

from the Boche side, was apparently turf, but which proved, on inspection, to be composed of 18-pdr. shells covered with sods; and to note that an old road across the front line had been stealthily repaired until it was now fit for the passage of guns and limbers.

On the return journey they passed through the scarcely discernible remains of a little village. The Boche in his retreat had blown two huge craters in the road; a new road skirted them, while the craters were used as an R.E. dump. Tosh appropriated a broom which was lying about, and gave it to his corporal to sweep out the Tank with. With this small souvenir they presently arrived at the camp, and sat down to a hearty meal.

That night operation orders were issued. After the usual details regarding troops to right and left, divisional and brigade boundaries, position of dressing-stations and headquarters, etc., detail was given of the route and objectives of each section and of each Tank. On Y night, at Z—— 7 hours, the Company would emerge from the wood, in order to have it free for the guns with which it was to be packed. The Tanks were to wait at a point either just in advance of or just behind the front line, until Z plus 30

minutes. The first wave would by then, if all went well, have taken the front line and be attacking the support. The Company would deploy into line of battle in no man's land, where their infantry would pick them up, and the whole line would advance as detailed to the successive objectives.

A time-table of the barrage followed. As this was to be fired by calculation from unregistered guns, it would *not* be too closely followed.

There was very little comment on the orders. The Major's operation orders were masterpieces of their kind, and left nothing to be explained. Each Tank Commander took his map and his aeroplane-photographs, retired to his bivvy, and set about making himself perfectly sure of what he had to do. Then, with hearts beating high with hope and excitement, they lay down to enjoy what might well be their last sleep for some time.

Next morning the Major called a parade and addressed the Company. He reminded them of their last attack and the many obstacles they had encountered—bad ground, bad weather, bad luck. Now was their chance to show that as in difficult circumstances they could stolidly fight against their difficulties, so when fortune at last

turned they could make the most of a good opportunity. Once again "C" Company had been chosen for the task which demanded enterprise and staying power; for, whereas the other companies had definite objectives, they who formed the second wave were first to overcome a series of definite obstacles, and were then to push on with an unlimited objective. He had often before spoken of "pooping off into the blue"; at last there was nothing to prevent their doing so. The whole responsibility of the attack had been deliberately thrown on the Tank Corps; it was their supreme opportunity. England expected that every Tank would do its damndest.

The Company having been dismissed, Tosh set about his preparations. Following his invariable rule, he destroyed all unnecessary papers, and packed his valise ready to go down the line in case of need. Having written a couple of field post cards and a letter, he cleaned and loaded his revolver, arranged his maps, packed his haversack with shaving-kit and money in case he should be wounded, filled his flask and cigarette-case, inspected his field-dressing, gave his servant instructions, and went into lunch.

The afternoon passed rapidly. Tosh first

manoeuvred his fascine into fighting position. He and his crew then went over their bus, inspecting every minutest detail. Guns were prepared for action, spare water and petrol were packed where shrapnel would not harm them, ammunition was examined, and controls were tested. Finally, Tosh collected his crew and put them through a catechism as to the forthcoming operation, shortly expressed his optimism as to its result ("We'll show the —— what we're made of!"), and dismissed them to their final meal.

At 9.30 the crews paraded by sections. A few minutes were given to final instructions. At 9.45 the Tanks moved out of the wood.

CHAPTER X

THE APPROACH-MARCH

APPROACH-MARCHES, however they may vary in detail, are inevitably similar in the emotions they arouse. Sometimes they are made over entirely unknown ground, teeming with obstacles which necessitate constant watchfulness. Sometimes they involve miles of driving along a narrow sleeper-road packed with excited horse-transport, while on either side a yawning ditch awaits the unlucky. Sometimes, as in the present case, they consist merely in cautious and silent driving over previously reconnoitred ground. Occasionally they are made amid the continuous crash of shells and blast of guns; more usually they are made in a waiting hush when every sound appears a betrayal. But, vary the details as you like, the heart of the matter remains the same—a breathless anxiety, a desperate hope, and a heart-felt wish to throw off the mask and be at them at last.

As the Tanks swung into line, Tosh, whose place was fifth, looked back at those who followed him. In this supreme hour of secrecy, not the glimmer of a torch might be

shown, and Tank Commanders must strain their eyes in the dark and see as best they might. But in front of every Tank was a glowing point of light—every pilot was smoking, and with his cigarette could signal to his crew. The irresistibly animal appearance of the Tanks was greatly heightened as they loomed ghostly out of the darkness; used as he was to the sight, Tosh was tempted to pat his beast on the track as it lumbered faithfully after him.

After half an hour's slow running, the Tanks swung across a road. Like every other road on that fateful night, it was a solid mass of slow-moving traffic. The thousands of empty gun-emplacements would not still be empty at zero! As they went forward the night was stealthily alive with chinks of harness and rumble of wheels, and everywhere they passed groups of men busy with mysterious activities. Occasionally a star-shell floated in the distant air, its light revealing that the country was full of men and horses; then darkness closed down again, and only their stealthy noises betrayed their presence.

As the line advanced, the occasional chatter of machine-guns began to sound very close. Soon they were carefully negotiating the

reserve-line, and all about them were infantry advancing across the open. Suddenly there came a disturbance away to the left. Trench-mortars barked viciously, machine-guns took up the affray, and five-nines might be heard whining across, to crump methodically in the little village away to the left. What did it mean? Had the Boche heard? Did he suspect, or was it merely a case of nerves? For some minutes the noise continued, then gradually died down and all was silence.

Presently the Tanks in front of Tosh stopped, and he went forward to discover the reason. It appeared that it still wanted an hour to zero, and they had almost arrived at the front line. As they were sheltered here by rising ground, the Major had determined to wait for half an hour before proceeding. Tosh stopped his engine, and explained the matter to his crew, who gladly came out of their stuffy steel box for fresh air and quiet. Tosh thereupon rejoined the officers.

Here a discussion was proceeding. It will be remembered that from zero to Z, plus 30, the Company was to lie up near the front line, the discussion being whether they should halt just behind the front line or push forward into no man's land. Amid all the uncertainty of the immediate future, one thing was

certain—our barrage at zero would provoke some sort of a counter-barrage. Now in the old days such a counter-barrage was usually laid on and behind the front line; but of late, with the increase in width of no man's land, a custom had grown up of barraging that debatable ground itself. After some talk it was decided to halt immediately behind the front line.

The half hour passed, but slowly. The night had grown bitterly cold, and all ranks were too much occupied with their own thoughts to indulge in light conversation. Tosh, for one, was heartily glad when the signal came to go on.

The trail now passed over a number of jumps. Tosh for the first time remembered the ton of wood balancing above his head, and how frail was its supporting hook. Consequently, it seemed to him a short interval indeed before they again halted, and his watch showed the time to be twenty minutes before zero. Indeed, the night was no longer dark; already a pale glow showed in the east, and it was with an uncomfortable sense of visibility that he sought company for the last dreary wait.

It is a truism that the best way to overcome nervousness is to make a joke of it. To this

may be directly traced that traditional spirit of careless mockery which, in spite of the stress laid upon it by newspaper correspondents, was in very truth the outstanding feature of the armies in France. In the present case, there was no question of the concealment of fear—every one there, from long experience, knew that his companions were experiencing the same symptoms, and was much too sure of himself to suppose that they indicated fear. But set the least imaginative of men in their position, a few yards from an enemy with whom in five minutes he will be engaged in a desperate struggle for life, and whether he be brave man or coward, or that wonderful mean which this war has shown is so gloriously common, he must feel some warning of overstrung nerves. Consequently as the officers sat round the rim of a shell-hole, they busied themselves with humorous descriptions of their own feelings, interspersed with gleeful pictures of the state of unpreparedness of the enemy, and the awful surprise which awaited him.

So passed ten minutes. It was now Z–10, and rising with one accord, they went forward beyond the Tanks and peered into no man's land. Somewhere ahead in battle array, "A" and "B" Company awaited the signal

which for them would be the beginning of the attack. In the grey dawn, the further ridge was just visible, but no Tanks or infantry could be distinguished. Slowly, in ticks which might have been heart-beats, the seconds passed; five minutes to go, four minutes, three minutes, two minutes—a long breath.

"Now for it," cried the Major.

With the words, as at some dread command, the silence was rent with stupendous clamour, as up and down the line for miles thousands of guns belched flame. With a cataclysmic crash the Boche line erupted in spouting volcanoes of smoke and earth, illumined in the flickering light of the incessant bursts. A second or two, and right, left and centre, up went flares of all colours—red, green, yellow, singly and in clusters—as the terrified front-line troops called upon their artillery to save them from annihilation. Meanwhile the officers, released at last from the intolerable strain of silence, cried out in delighted profanity at the hellish din of the barrage. No one could hear his neighbour's voice—the field-guns were seeing to that—all were perfectly happy to shout their comments to the air.

As the excitement gradually died down, they strained their eyes to see how their

friends had been faring. Dawn was breaking, but the dust of the barrage and a thin ground-mist hid all sight of the enemy lines. Returning to their buses, the crews awaited, amid the crashing thunder, the signal to take their part in the fray.

CHAPTER XI

REALIZATION

COMPARED with the half hour before zero, the half hour after zero passed in a flash, and Tosh seemed hardly to have reached his seat before the line was in motion, and he found himself carefully crossing the British front line.

In no man's land the Tanks were to adopt battle formation; but to avoid loss of direction (the bugbear of advancing troops) they first divided into left and right half companies, and continued to advance in column of route. The left half company, of which Tosh was the centre, rollowed an old road to where it forked, and, avoiding the huge crater which the Boche had blown on his retirement, they spread out fan wise until, the centre pair waiting for the flanks to take position, the half company was in line of battle. The right flank was now in touch with the left flank of the right half company, and with slight readjustments of distance the whole line advanced to the first trench in parade formation.

The subsequent five minutes were to Tosh a

very anxious time. The front and support lines should by this time have been taken, but manifold are the unexpected chances of war, and at any moment he might be greeted with a hail of bullets. Meanwhile, as he crackled merrily through the wire, he was forced to slow down to keep his place in the line.

At last the front line came into view, a huge trench whose difficulties had not been over-estimated. Captured obviously, and in our hands; but where were the flags which were to have marked the presence of the first wave's fascines? Anxiously Tosh peered right and left. No sign of a flag; but away to the right he saw the explanation. Three Tanks were ditched there, close together. Either their fascines had fallen off or they had proved useless, and the attempt to cross without had failed. Tosh determined to drop his own fascine. Lifting his hand to the lever he pulled it to one side; with a crackle the great bundle lurched forward, and dropped accurately into the trench. Tosh signalled his driver to go forward; the Tank's nose dropped true on to the fascine, and in a second they were across. A glance behind showed that the nearest Tank was preparing to follow him across.

By this slight failure in the plans, Tosh

was prepared to find part of the support line in enemy possession, and advanced with every nerve strained. Such did not prove entirely the case, for soon he could see Jocks in the trench ; but, as he approached them, they pointed wildly in a slightly left direction. As Tosh looked that way, suddenly with a tremendous thwack a bullet struck an inch from the open flap and scattered red-hot chips over his face. With hasty hand he closed the shutter, and peered about through a periscope to locate the aggressor. Meanwhile the solitary shot was followed by a shower which played a regular devil's tattoo within a foot of Tosh's nose.

The noise made by the impact of a bullet on a Tank is unlike any other—a peculiar, ringing thwack, which is always associated with the smell of burnt paint. Such bullets as strike near a flap or gun-port send in a shower of red-hot chips which are apt to lodge under the skin of the Tank Commander, whence, if left alone, they emerge a few weeks later. The phenomenon of the speckled face is one familiar to all who have seen Tank crews after action.

Tosh, in the present case, received a few chips, but soon covered his face with his tin hat ; and, while his hands were stinging under

the shower they were receiving, he succeeded in spotting the source of these unwelcome attentions—a concrete pill-box almost hidden under tree-trunks and rubble. From previous experience, he expected a stout resistance, but the enemy were too badly shaken, and at the second well-placed shot from the port six-pounder the firing ceased and the garrison surrendered. Leaving them to the care of the infantry, Tosh went on his way rejoicing. All anxiety, as usual, had vanished at the sound of his own gun, leaving only a burning impatience to get on.

In crossing the front and support lines, the Tanks had necessarily lost their dressing, but, none having been ditched, distances were soon corrected, and the laggards drew level. The co-operating infantry appeared as if by magic, and the second phase of the operation commenced. Unfortunately, however, time had been lost, and they were a good half-hour behind the barrage.

The first objective was a small switch-line running out at an angle to the reserve system. This, it had been anticipated, would prove a tough obstacle. But the sudden onset out of the dark of innumerable prehistoric monsters had considerably upset the enemy,

and beyond occasional fugitives from earlier objectives the trench was deserted.

As has been mentioned, it ran at an angle to the previous lines. As the smoke-barrage had entirely obscured the distant landmarks, there was a tendency among the advancing Tanks to lose direction. Tosh easily surmounted this difficulty. His orders were to strike a road running up the slope and follow it; this he proceeded to do.

The wave of Tanks now approached a railway cutting. This had been utilized by the enemy, not as a line of defence, but as a system of suburban residences. Nevertheless, as the Tanks came up they were greeted with a fair sprinkling of bullets. At a later date there were conflicting claims among the crews regarding the share of each in the demolishment of these machine-guns; at the moment all Tosh observed was that his starboard gun fired three rounds, while, as they crossed the cutting, he saw an involved medley of steel and flesh which had recently been a machine-gun and crew.

But better things were in store for Tank 2597. In accordance with orders, she pushed straight on to the next objective, while her companions to right and left remained to assist the infantry in clearing dug-outs. She

was then in a position to make good use of any opportunities which might offer.

Tosh soon arrived at his mark, a long zig-zag trench running right across from a village well to the left of the Company front to the village which formed their final objective. At the point where he crossed, it was empty, but, as he swung to patrol along it, suddenly, away to the left, he saw grey-clad figures leap from shelter and run wildly right across his front.

Then for the crew of Tank 2597 began the rabbit-shooting of their fondest dreams. Streams and streams of the enemy, their retreat cut off by Tosh and their front menaced by the approaching wave, broke wildly from cover. As fast as the gunners could reload, they poured in a hail of bullets, Tosh himself firing and yelling like a maniac. At last the panic subsided, the remainder of the enemy apparently realizing the futility of an attempt to escape; but it left Tosh and his crew hoarse with joy and almost beside themselves with excitement. To those who have never experienced it, the lust of battle must always appear unnatural and terrible; but ever after Tosh would look back to those few minutes of slaughter as among the most joyful moments of his life.

With the cessation of the panic bolt, all appeared to be over, and Tosh proceeded slowly parallel with the trench. Suddenly, in a shell-hole dead ahead, he noticed three living figures—Boche—in grey uniforms and big black helmets, kamerading. He drew closer to within a few yards. His approach threw them into the last extremity of terror; faces mottled with sickly green, eyes starting, mouths agape, their bodies racked with trembling, they knew not whether to bolt and be shot or stay and be run over.

Tosh too was faced with a problem. If he left them they would infallibly get away to the enemy lines, but to shoot them in cold blood did not appeal to his instincts. Finally he swung left and blotted them from his mind.

He was now approaching another section of the trench he had crossed. To his astonishment he found it still full of Boches, about 150 with two officers, all kamerading in approved style, and throwing equipment bombs and rifles on to the parapet. This was too much for a man in Tosh's state of excitement. In defiance of orders, armed only with a revolver, he climbed out of his Tank and strolled up and down the parados, yelling at the dumbfounded enemy in a marvellous mixture of bad French and worse Dutch, until finally

the infantry arrived at the double, and he handed over the prisoners, climbed into the bus and carried on with the war.

Up till now the operation had progressed with a smoothness rarely seen in war. Two miles and a half of enemy territory had been stormed at an insignificant cost, and there seemed nothing to prevent a like further advance. But it is behind her broadest smile that Fortune ever hides her most dastardly plots.

The last objective to be tackled was the support system, which was as strong as the front line system, and had had due warning of attack. It lay over the crest of the slope up which the Tanks had been working, and was thus still out of sight. Tosh's first duty was to inspect a cemetery slightly in advance of the line. This proved to have been abandoned; but the time taken to examine it had sufficed for the infantry to occupy the front line of the new system.

As Tosh crawled over the crest of the rise and crossed the trench, he noticed several Jocks pointing ahead and waving their arms wildly. He peered out, but could see no reason for their warning. As he was following the safe procedure of peppering all the surrounding country with his machine-gun, his

attention was caught and held by an appalling sight. A Tank to the right had suddenly burst into a bright sheet of flame, while such of the crew as were able could be seen scuttling like rabbits to shelter. A premonition passed through his mind—field-guns ! He turned back to try and spot them, when suddenly, at his very ear, there came a bang like unto the crack of doom, and all round him was flame and choking vapour, and the awful screaming of stricken men.

In subsequent recollection only two impressions remained of the next few seconds. He could remember crying " Get out of it," at the top of his voice, and he could remember a terrible second while scrambling, scrabbling men tried to open the side door. When next his mind could record impressions he was lying flat in a shallow trench twenty yards away, his first driver by his side.

Tosh himself and the first driver were uninjured. Close by, in the trench, Tosh saw his N.C.O., who proved to be unhurt save for a generous lump of metal in the right cheek. He reported that the third driver, apparently demented, had fled wildly to the cemetery, fifty yards away. Of the eight, therefore, four were almost untouched.

The air was now fairly alive with bullets,

but Tosh and his men, bent almost double, gained the partial shelter of the burning Tank. Here they found a gunner, his face yellow with lyddite and distorted with shock. On examination, he had nothing worse than a broken leg and a slight arm-wound, but at present he was too dazed to help himself. They carried him to the comparative safety of the trench and returned to the Tank. They then discovered a second gunner, evidently too far gone for help. He showed small signs of any wound, but even as Tosh bent over him he straightened slowly, spread his arms, and with a half-sigh he was dead.

"Poor old Jimmie," said the first driver, "he never knew what hit him."

Tosh turned his head away towards the Tank, started, and clutched his driver's arm. From the open door of what was now a smoking ruin crawled a terrible figure. One arm was smashed to pulp, one leg dragged; the body was soaked in blood. But the face—one whole cheek had been blown away, and through the gaping hole the tongue could be seen working feverishly over the shattered jaw. Worse still, the light in the eyes left no room for merciful doubt but that the wreck of a man was still sane. There was no shadow of pain—Tosh seized that crumb of comfort—

only a strained perplexity at the unwieldiness of the crippled body.

Fighting with the deadly nausea which almost choked him, Tosh went to the man—his best gunner and firmest friend—and took him in his arms. After a moment's inspection he reached for his revolver, and for twenty seconds tried to nerve himself to the merciful deed. But the decision was too hard for him. Ghastly as the man's wounds were, he might not be beyond hope, and for the moment he could not—his eyes showed that he could not be suffering. With a sob Tosh laid him down and turned away.

The Tank was burning fiercely, and the exploding ammunition made a continuous rattle. One man was still unaccounted for; but to enter her was impossible, and nothing could still be alive in that inferno. Beyond his revolver Tosh had no weapon. His first duty, therefore, was towards his wounded.

With many a stumble and many a rest in shell-holes, the three unwounded men carried off the gunner with the broken leg. The air was still full of the clack and whine of bullets, while the field gun which had knocked Tosh out was sending shells so low as apparently to skim the ground. Making for the cemetery they kept behind the shelter of its little

quickset hedge, in which birds still twittered, and so, stumbling among the tombstones, came at last to the sunken cross-road behind it, where they deposited their burden.

Leaving the two men to tie up their comrade, Tosh set about discovering the whereabouts of his section commander, who had been in the Tank on his right. The first available Jock informed him that a Captain of the Tanks, who had been blown up, was sitting "ben" in the trench a little to the right. Tosh immediately set off in that direction; but he must have carried in his face potent signs of the events of the last half-hour, for his informant set off with him, and, questions, entreaties and commands notwithstanding, insisted on following him wherever he went.

Thus personally conducted, Tosh entered the trench where it opened on the sunken road, and, while bullets clacked merrily overhead, pushed past the kilted occupants until he came upon his skipper.

Captain Alphen, M.C., was seated on the fire-step talking to Herr Von, in whose Tank he had been accommodated. Both were busily engaged in eating chocolate. As Tosh came round the traverse, they greeted him with a cheery hail and offered him a slab.

They, too, it seemed, had been knocked out, but without serious casualties, and had taken refuge in this, the nearest trench. Tosh accepted the chocolate, and gave half to his faithful Jock, who made his adieux with a broad smile on his honest face.

With the opportunity to tell his experiences Tosh felt relief from the load of horror which had oppressed him ; and such is the elasticity of the human spirit that soon he was laughing with them at the dramatic change in the situation.

"Well, anyway," said Alphen, "none of us are in a position to do anything. The infantry have had no casualties worth speaking of, and have the situation well in hand. Come along, Tosh, and we'll see about your wounded. Herr Von, collect your crew and take them off to the rendezvous in the railway cutting. I'll be along there presently."

On arriving at the sunken cross-roads, they found the gunner with the broken leg recovered from his shock, and he was despatched to the dressing station leaning on the shoulder of the corporal, whose face now obviously needed attention. The gunner who had bolted at the time of the explosion had now returned, and shamefacedly reported to Tosh ; he had lost three fingers of his right

hand, and nine-tenths of his nerve, and was sent off down the road after the others. Finally, the first driver was entrusted with a message to the Major at the rendezvous.

Having disposed of the walking wounded, Tosh turned his attention to bringing back the only remaining number of the crew. Stretcher-bearers were few and far between, but he succeeded in finding two. These he conducted through the cemetery, which still hummed with bullets, and between them they brought the pitiful wreck of a man to the cross-road. Tosh noted with a sigh of relief that he was now delirious.

The next requisite was a stretcher. Prospecting along the road, Tosh found a Boche officer with a shattered leg lying on one waiting to be carried down. This was no time for niceties of behaviour. Lifting off the protesting man, they seized the stretcher, and in a minute Tosh was supporting his driver while the stretcher-bearers raised the load on to their shoulders.

The way to the dressing-station lay along a road, but it was long and very tiring for the bearers. To Tosh it was endless, for the delirious man kept making determined efforts to get off the stretcher, groaning and crying the while with pain and mumbling and

mowing with his shattered jaws. At last they reached the dressing-station, where the doctor pronounced the case very serious, but not altogether hopeless.

Tosh now proceeded to the rendezvous. Here he was met with the news of the death of the Major five minutes after the beginning of the attack. The second in command, now Acting O.C., ordered all crews of knocked-out Tanks to report themselves at the camp in the wood. Weary to death, but cheerful, they lightened the way with the swapping of experiences, and at last in utter fatigue Tosh crept into bed and fell into dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XII

THE PRICE

NEXT morning Tosh permitted himself the luxury of breakfast in bed. In spite of some gruesome memories, his prevailing feeling was of intense satisfaction. The Corps had broken a famous trench-system; the Company had lived up to its reputation; he himself had shot many Boches and had escaped death by a miracle.

The morning was fully occupied in making out reports. Every subaltern in the Tank Corps enjoys after action the doubtful privilege of writing a detailed history of his performance, together with any suggestions he may wish to make regarding future shows. This Battle History Sheet is forwarded to Corps H.Q., and in some cases to G.H.Q. itself. Its composition frequently causes more misgivings than the action it is intended to describe.

At lunch Alphen informed Tosh that, as the line was now two miles beyond the cemetery, a burial party would be going up that afternoon. Tosh decided to accompany

it, if only to make certain of the fate of his seventh man—reported killed.

At two o'clock the party fell in and were marched off. At first they followed the Tank-track of two nights ago, but under slightly different circumstances. What had been a silent waste where men went delicately was now a caravanserai of horse-lines, camps, and battery positions. Already the grass had been trampled into mud a foot deep, and for any attempt at camouflage the Boche might have been a hundred miles off instead of five.

Skirting the craters on the road, they passed through the ruined village and so across no man's land of yesterday to the old Boche front line. Occasional "stiffs" were to be seen lying about, already swollen and fly-covered, but nothing had been left which might furnish a souvenir. Equipment, badges, great-coats, all had been taken—the Jocks had been here!

Down in the ravine they came on the surviving Tanks of the Company, under guard, and halted while Alphen gave a few instructions. They then climbed the further slope, past the railway cutting, in which Jocks were now accommodated, and came to the trench which had provided Tosh with so much sport,

The evidences of that sport were lying about. and he realized with something of a shock that these had been fellow-men he had so delighted to shoot.

The party now arrived at the cemetery, and fell out for five minutes before commencing their unpleasant task. From where Tosh sat he looked away across open country to a village beneath a wooded crest. Here lay the present front line, but no sound gave evidence of the armed forces concealed in that blue expanse. The air, however, was full of the hum of aeroplanes, and high overhead passed a squadron going up to reconnoitre.

The five minutes up, Alphen took half the men off to the right, while with the other half Tosh sought his own Tank.

As they drew near they came first upon the dead gunner. Arms outstretched, eyes staring at the sky, on his face a complete negation of expression, he seemed to Tosh a poignant reminder of the vanity of the flesh, and a potent indication of the spirit's immortality. These men with him—they had known the dead so much better than he—did they not feel the impossibility of this clay being all that was left of their friend and companion?

Leaving his men to dig the grave and compose the body, Tosh passed to the farther side of the Tank. From this side had come the shells. As he looked at that battered, broken wreck, he marvelled that anyone had come out of it alive. Seven shells in all had entered, and the shape was almost unrecognisable. Drawing nearer, Tosh peered in, and was left in no further doubt of the fate of his seventh man.

Stepping back from the stench, he called for four men and a blanket.

"My God," said one, "burnt to death."

"No, you fool," exclaimed Tosh, with a queer irritability, "can't you see he was killed before he was burnt? Come on, let's get it over."

In the pitiful blanket shroud the body was carried to the grave. Setting up the cross they had brought, the men covered it in; Tosh nailed on the two name-plates; together they saluted the dead and passed on.

The next Tank to be dealt with lay to the left. On their way to it they passed a point where fighting had been more severe, and all about lay bodies. For the sake of the mothers to whom he must shortly write, Tosh was glad that the Tank Corps usually

found opportunity to bury its own dead within a few days of battle.

Arrived at the Tank the men were faced with a particularly horrible work. A shell had landed on the cab, killing instantaneously both officer and first driver, and a fire subsequently starting, the bodies had been roasted where they lay. The officer had been a particular friend of Tosh's—still a boy at heart, with a boy's gaiety and untainted outlook on life. The death of a friend he had grown used to, but this was no ordinary death. Sick at heart, he thanked God that he directed but need bear no actual hand.

The burial finished, Tosh threw off his haunting visions and marched off the men to rejoin Captain Alphen's party. Together they then marched through the village which the day before had formed their final objective. Only one Tank had penetrated the village; towards her their steps were now bent.

It was on the very extremity of the village that they came upon her. In the field beyond three field-guns still lay. Having been warned of her approach, they had evidently watched for her appearance, and no sooner had she cleared the last house than they had reduced her to a flaming hulk.

Of her crew of eight, four had escaped and

had crept back through the enemy lines to safety. The other four were known by name, but their bodies were quite unrecognisable.

On the way home that night, Tosh marvelled at his insensibility. He and his men had seen sights that day which might have haunted them for life. Yet here they were, within an hour, joking with one another, looking forward to a hearty supper and a dreamless night's sleep. Yet they were not hardened or callous—at heart he knew them to be sympathetic almost to a fault.

On arrival in the camp it was announced that next afternoon all effectives would move forward to billets four miles in advance.

CHAPTER XIII

ORCHESTRA STALLS

DETAILS of the move were to hand next morning. The infantry, it seemed, had struck a tough proposition on ahead, and to-morrow a full-dress Tank attack was to be made on it. The orders were to continue attacking until it was taken; consequently reinforcements for the crews must be on the spot to replace casualties. All crews still complete with Tanks would move up in the evening and attack next day; those who had succeeded in getting rid of their charges would be spectators of the battle unless, and until, their services should be required. As on many previous occasions, Tosh congratulated himself on his facility in that most highly-prized of Tank arts—the art of leaving your bus on the field of battle!

The "non-combatants," as the Acting O.C. described them, paraded at 3 p.m. Tosh had carefully packed his valise and handed it over to the camp guard; on his shoulders he carried his immediate necessities for the ensuing week.

They proceeded first to Herr Von's derelict

Tank. It had been effectively knocked out, but had not caught fire. Tosh left his party to transfer ammunition from it to such mobile buses as needed it, while he strolled off to examine the battery which had knocked him out, whence he shortly returned with an electric torch and an aluminium drinking-flask. Considering that the Jocks had been before him, he was satisfied even with so poor a haul.

The light was now failing, and it devolved upon Tosh to go ahead and find a route for the Tanks. This proved simple enough; but it provided him with a sensation he was never to forget—the feeling of having "broken through" the trench system to "the blue" that lay beyond. Later on, both sides would grow well acquainted with that feeling, but at the time it was as rare as it was blissful.

After a three-mile drive the Company arrived at the little village where the Tanks were to lie up for the night. At the time of their arrival the place was quiet and seemingly deserted, though it lay only 800 yards behind the front line. A billet having been found for the men, and a fire started for their dixies, the officers discovered a house with its roof intact, and were soon enjoying a hot meal.

The guns that night were quiet, being en-

gaged in preparation for the morrow. But sooner or later the village was bound to come under heavy shell-fire, for the enemy had hurried up reserves and would not easily relinquish the position to be stormed. It was therefore decided not to sleep in the village, but to move to a line of dug-outs some five hundred yards back. A wise decision without doubt; but unfortunately other people had arrived at the same conclusion, and when Tosh finally settled down it was in a dug-out with thirty men of a signalling section, on a wire bed none too broad with three bed-fellows to keep him snug. It is not often that the Tank Corps is compelled to sleep in dug-outs; this was a Boche dug-out and contained a liberal supply of voracious fauna; the air was stuffy in the extreme; yet Tosh slept like a lamb until seven next morning.

On waking he rose, stretched himself, staggered up the ninety steps of the dug-out and stood at the top gulping the fresh morning air. Near at hand he discovered the mess servants serving breakfast—a most welcome sight.

Zero that morning had been fixed for the unusual hour of ten. Tosh discovered that the Acting Company Commander was going up on foot behind the attacking wave to see

how things progressed, and succeeded in being allowed to go with him. More Pilkinson refused to take, and the reader will be well advised if he follows the example of the scribe and remains at a safe distance from the imminent battle.

From the line of dug-outs in which they had slept, the little party of "non-combatants" obtained such a view of the battlefield as is usually vouchsafed only to "balloonatics" or war correspondents. From where they sat the ground sloped gently to a hollow in which lay the village. Here the Tanks were parked; while near them lay several batteries of field guns, rushed up the night before. At the moment they were covered up and deserted, but doubtless in the fullness of time their crews would appear.

Beyond the village the ground rose evenly again to the wood-crowned ridge some two miles off. Somewhere on that slope was the front line, while the wood was to-day's final objective. It was known to be packed full of machine-guns in the hands of desperate crews, yet in the morning light it lay peaceful and apparently deserted.

At nine the Tanks moved off in file, skirted the village, and were lost to sight in the valley. At 9.15 a Boche battery began

shelling the village. The whines and crashes came in regular succession, raising clouds of red brick-dust, but no shells came near the dug-outs. At 9.30 there were signs of activity among the batteries in the hollow. Guns were uncovered and swung into position, while signallers could be seen selecting points of observation.

Aeroplanes now began to arrive, patrol by patrol, till the air was full of the hum of their engines. In the interest of a contest between six British and nine enemy 'planes, the spectators forgot to watch the time, and it was the sudden crash of the artillery in the valley which apprised them of the fact that the battle had begun.

To men who three days before had been in the thick of a similar affair, the panorama-view of that day's attack was an unforgetable experience. The first thing to strike them was the noise. To the men actually engaged, the noise of modern war is an incidental hardly worthy of note; but in the position they were now in the crews were astonished at the din even of so ragged a barrage as was put up that day. Yet through all the thunder of the guns, the wicked chattering of innumerable machine-guns beat upon the ear in a vast wave of

sound. "My God," said Tosh's first driver "what a hell of a hot shop it must be!"

For at least an hour nothing could be seen of the actual attack. A copious smoke barrage enveloped the ridge, while the lower slope was invisible. The spectators therefore turned their attention to a battery close by. The Battery Commander could be seen signalling the various lifts of the barrage, the signals being repeated at each gun, while the stripped crews sweated and strained to get off the maximum number of rounds. In the distance a flag-signaller was sending what seemed like an endless succession of O.K.'s.

In the air, too, there was plenty to engage attention. Patrols of low-flying aeroplanes wheeled constantly over the village, dashing to the lines and dipping down with their tip-tilted tails exactly as a dragon-fly dips to the water. As one such patrol wheeled in line, suddenly the rear machine swerved sideways and down, and, quick as light, it was a flaming wreck beside the village.

Meanwhile, high in the upper levels the spotters and the fighters were at work, guns spitting viciously as foe met foe. A Boche which had broken through came directly overhead, the crosses on her wings plainly discernible, and, as she wheeled over the

batteries, dropped a long streamer of black smoke. For a full half-hour the crews expected the answering salvo, but none came, and the enemy were content to paste the village methodically with five-nines.

The smoke barrage being now over, in a few minutes some of the Tanks were visible half-way up the ridge. "C" Company was working close to the wood, and nothing could be seen of them but the irregular flashes of their six-pounders; but away to the left —— Battalion could clearly be seen cresting the slope. One, as it topped the hill, appeared for a few seconds to have stopped; then suddenly came a flash, and a column of smoke mingled with vicious stabs of flame.

"Knocked out," exclaimed some one, "wonder who the poor blighters are!"

All there knew from the most recent experience what it meant to be knocked out!

The attack had now been in full swing for two hours, a time which the Staff had judged amply sufficient for the taking of all objectives. Consequently the barrage abruptly ceased; the batteries covered up; and the gunners presumably attacked their lunch. Yet the machine-gun fire had not diminished the slightest degree in intensity, and from a good five hundred yards *behind* the guns it

could be seen that the wood was not by any means captured. The Tank Corps is too well used to ignorant criticism to indulge in it to any unreasonable extent, but with the thought of what their comrades were going through many curses were poured out on the heedless heads of the R.F.A.

The crews were seated on the bank of a main road. Along this road presently came a little group of walking wounded. To eager questions they would answer but little. Yes, the machine-gun fire was hellish, but there was no shelling to speak of. Couldn't say how the attack was going--seemed to be all right. How far was the C.C.S.? Oh, yes, a Blighty all right, but damn painful at present. Had they any water to give away?

After continuing for four hours the firing seemed now to be slackening. Gradually it petered out and all was silence. The flashes of six-pounders could no longer be seen, while the Tanks on the left had disappeared. Soon down the slope to the left of the village there came into view first one, then another, then two more, till finally—praises be!—the total number which had gone in were in sight. Their troubles were not entirely over, for the Boche had them under observation, and was sniping them with five-nines; but they did

not tarry on the homeward journey, and sniping with a five-nine at a moving target is no easy matter.

A couple of eager spirits dashed off to get the first news. But Tosh's driver had his eye on two men who were approaching along the road. One, to all appearance an officer, had his arm in a sling, while the other was carrying two kits.

"By ——, it's him," ejaculated the first driver. "Look here, sir," he said to Herr Von, "here comes Mr. —— along the road. Looks as if he's stopped something."

As the pair came near, there could be no doubt of their identity. Hayles, the orderly, looked relieved on seeing his friends, but on Tosh's face was such a medley of amusement, shame and rejoicing as moved Herr Von to most unsympathetic laughter.

"Well, you old humbug," he called, "don't tell me you've been getting hurt? Were you opening a tin of bully, or what? Seriously, though, it's not bad, is it?"

"Hell, no," replied Tosh, "only an in-and-out. But, my oath, I've never been so surprised in my life. There were the three of us, Pilkinson, Hayles and I, sitting as cushy as you like in a shell-hole miles away from everything, when all of a sudden—ping! ping!

wheesh !, and here was me with a ruddy wound ! Easy as kiss my hand !

" The show ? Bit of a wash-out, I'm afraid. You see, the wood's too thick for Tanks, and no matter how far we went along the edge the infantry couldn't stand the flanking fire. The place was lousy with machine-guns, and most of our buses got casualties from them. We must have killed off any number of Boches, though. Simpson and Dolph got right into the village behind the wood, but the infantry couldn't hold more than half the slope, so we left them there in an old Boche trench.

" You know when I think of those poor blighters in the buses, going through hell and having nothing to show for it, and me sitting watching, to go and get a cushy one !

" However, a joke's a joke, but this thing is getting stiff, and I don't want any tetanus, so I'll push off. Come on, Hayles, you come along with me. Well, see you chaps in a month's time, I expect. Meanwhile, hospital, sheets, and a V.A.D. ! Cheerioh ! "

And, to a chorus of " Cheeriohs " and " Good lucks," he turned his back on the Tanks and walked off down the road.

THE END.

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